

Tormentcaches

By Ben Sumner

Prologue

1

The shining wings descended from the clouds, on the same side of the Great Sphere that near star rises. The storm blew inland, rustling the trees and whisking the onlooker's hair.

Once a sincere warning, the prophecy of the shining wings became a myth. Several had passed, but only one had landed. Then, the elders cried their warnings but were laughed back into their huts as the man within posed no threat. The Tormentcaches devoured him, and then claimed the prophecy was false.

Others had floated to their shores, but the tribe would greet them with lively sneers before roasting their foreign flesh and celebrating another victory over the Hraptor's favored beings.

With a dwindling population and belief in the prophecy all but gone, the wings glided closer to their gold-sanded borders. The onlooker knew it could be nothing but the prophecy, unleashing the destroyer upon them at their greatest moment of denial and weakness.

Classifieds - Los Angeles Times

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Part I

Foreign voices chanted to the beat of heavy drums. Beams of bonfire light shot through the foliage, shifting rapidly with the dancing shadows.

On his hands and knees, the boy scooted forward.

Smoke clouded around him and each breath of it boosted his mind into a state of hazy delight. He crouched closer, staring, comfortable yet frightened, wishing to join them in their lashing-limbs dance.

The firelight gleamed off their chestnut skin. Black braided hair hung the length of their backbones. Rings of animal claws pierced their ears, eyebrows, nostrils and nipples. Crooked teeth stuck out from between stretched lips. Bare feet pounded into the

ground, sending up a fog of dust with each romping step. Facial hair coated the men's cheeks and chins, while red designs stenciled the faces of the topless women in grass skirts.

"Brendan? Where are you?" she hollered.

Oh shit.

"Brendan, is that you?" He jerked his head around, breaking his lock on the tribesmen, seeing her dim flashlight scan across the wooded ground.

"Brendan!"

The music stopped, as did their dance. They stood at attention, ears perked, eyes scanning the village borders for the source of disruption. Through the bushes they spotted the pale-skinned boy, crouching behind branches, his white face gawking at them.

One of the men, head capped with an animal's skin like a furry beret, shot his arm and finger through the air and roared.

He spun and dashed toward her. *"Run!"*

Deanna's flashlight shined in his face.

"Run!" The boy's voice cracked. Deanna turned and started forward as he grabbed her arm, hardly slowing as he pulled her along. Something skidded across her thigh and she dropped, her

face narrowly missing the end of the spear that suddenly stuck from the ground. Pain trembled in her knee as she struggled to spring back.

"Get up!" he shrieked, stretching his arm. Deanna felt the graze of his fingers before his back straightened and he fell forward, knocking her back to the ground. Over his shoulder she could see a long rod wedged in his spine, standing straight up like a flagpole. Before she could even scream, his head bent toward her with gaping eyes, and a mouthful of blood came flowing out with a rasping hurl.

Suddenly his weight lifted from her and he hovered several feet in the air, his eyes still staring into hers before he was cast into the bushes.

Stomping on her fallen flashlight, a man in a loincloth and a furry hat stood over her, smirking. She lost her screams in a dry throat as the savage swung his fist.

2

"Don't even think about chopping down anything that's still living," Steve Simmons said to the teenaged campers as he paced impatiently. "Just get wood that snaps like celery. We're gonna be building fires for breakfast, lunch and dinner, not to mention

keeping it going until bedtime, so don't expect to come on a survival trip to sit around. Now let's go!"

He clapped, and the campers got up from their seats on the wooded ground and headed for the forest.

"You sound like my lieutenant in Nam," said Johnny Stewart, the camp's nature guide. "Don't be too rough on em. It's camp. Make sure they're still having a good time."

"They'll be all right," Steve said. "If I talk sternly, they're more likely to get the firewood than if I ask passively."

"Cigarette?" Johnny held out an opened pack of Marlboros.

"Haven't smoked in years." Steve snatched one.

Captain George Kraser stepped off the rear-end of the aircraft. A flat stretch of land, about the length of a football field, stretched toward the eastern beach.

"Cigarette, George?" Johnny asked.

"Oh no thanks, don't even try to tempt me." George, a former Air Force pilot, was in his early sixties.

"Come on, George, it's camp! Have a good time." Steve grinned, eyeing the campers as they ran around.

"There ain't nothing in this world that'll tempt me except a cigarette. Whores, booze, gambling, I stay away like I'm Jesus

Christ."

"But they'd still let you in heaven if you smoke, George," Johnny paused and struck a match. "I'm shit out of luck if they don't."

...

Counselors Meg Weber and Rusty Jacobs worked on their shelters as the campers collected firewood.

"Did you see how close Brendan and Deanna were getting?" Meg asked. "They just met this morning."

"Reminds me of myself a couple years ago," Rusty said.

Uh, sure it does, Meg thought, looking at Rusty's unkempt brown hair tied with a rubber band in a ponytail. Empty holes lined his earlobes, except for two gold studs above a hoop in his left ear, and another hoop in his right.

"You don't think they're gonna hit it off already, do you?" She smiled, running her hand through her brownish-blond hair.

"Horny teens are capable of anything," Rusty said. Meg blushed, hearing the seriousness in his voice as if he were trying to teach her something. Rusty was a teenager himself, though a few years older than the campers.

"Rusty!" Johnny called from across the camp as he approached

them. Behind him, the teenagers ran back and forth from the ring of stones and dropped firewood into the growing pile. "Let's get dinner started, please."

"Yes sir," Rusty went to the plane, where they stored the food in a couple of coolers.

"Good kid," Meg said as Johnny stepped up.

"Sure is. He works with me and the family at my camping surplus store, right up near Yosemite."

"How many kids do you have?"

"Three boys and three girls. My youngest two are coming here with us in August. My older two daughters are married and pregnant. The wife and the other two and are back home running the store."

"Quite a family."

"My daughters just got married in April, on the same day, same church."

Meg smiled. "That must have been wonderful."

"Hell, what I remember most about it was the tuxedo. I didn't know what half the accessories were for. My mother-in-law saw I didn't have my cufflinks and buttons on, so she unbuttoned my shirt outside the church and stuck them in for me, just as

everyone arrived! The pastor couldn't stop laughing."

Meg giggled.

"Good thing the bow tie was a clip-on," Johnny said.

...

Steve walked around the campsite, seeing that the campers had already grown bored of gathering firewood and resorted to joking around. Just as he was about to yell, he saw a pair of bare feet sticking out from under the blue tarp of a shelter.

He crouched and peaked inside. One of the older boys rested on his sleeping bag, reading a comic book.

"Hey, why aren't you gathering firewood?" Steve shot him an annoyed grin.

"I didn't know I had to," the kid said.

"Why aren't you out there with the group?"

"I dunno."

Steve smirked. *Never had behavior problems with a Chinese kid before.* "What's your name again?"

"David."

"David. Lose the attitude and go get some firewood. Now."

...

Along with deadwood, the campers dropped off canteens of

water from a nearby spring, which Rusty emptied into a kettle. The metal grate over the fire was big enough to hold three pots at a time. He planned to use one for purifying water, one for boiling pasta, and a third for cooking tomato sauce.

Rusty enjoyed cooking while camping, even though he would be doing it all summer. It was better than working at a fast food restaurant, which he did after high school until he quit. Shortly after, his mother kicked him out of the house, so he stayed with a few of his friends, got drunk and smoked weed every night. He made a few bucks playing in a band with some neighborhood buddies, but that ended after three gigs when he broke his electric guitar over the head of a skinhead at an all-ages show. That fall, he moved in with two guys he met at a court-ordered Narcotics Anonymous meeting and got a job at Johnny's store.

At first, Rusty figured Johnny would be another jerk boss, but he was anything but that. Johnny not only gave him a job, but also invited him to his house for barbeques with his family. When Johnny got the camp counselor job, he convinced owner Jack Rachel to let Rusty be the counselor-in-training. It didn't pay anything, but it gave him the chance to go to camp for the first time in his life.

Johnny and Rusty made the camp menu themselves, mostly canned foods, plenty of pasta, peanut butter and pita bread, and enough hot cocoa from the packets to last the week. They planned each meal, three a day for 20 people, six days. When they returned, the next session's supply would be waiting for them at the airport.

...

"You know who the stupidest crooks are?" Billy said as he and Shawn played cards by their shelters. "Rapists who demand blow jobs."

Shawn laughed. A few girls overheard and scowled at them.

"It's stupid for two reasons. Number one: She'll bite the living hell out of you. Number two: After you run away in pain, and the police find you checking yourself into the emergency room requesting stitches, they'll put you in the lineup with several other guys. Then the group would have to drop their pants, and she'll go down the line. 'Normal, too small, too large, too crooked, one nut, uncut...'"

"Hermaphrodite," Shawn said.

"Teeth marks! There! It's the guy with the teeth marks on his dick!"

"That's not funny, guys," Suzzie said, but Billy and Shawn only laughed harder.

"Everyone, come here, now!" Steve stood by the center fire and repeated himself a few more times.

Meg counted the campers. "Steve, we're missing two."

"Who?"

"Brendan and Deanna."

"They're in the woods, doing it," Billy announced as the other boys chuckled.

Steve looked at his watch. It was quarter til 8. "I think we should all go look for them."

"What about dinner?" Rusty asked, halfway through cutting the metal lid off the tomato sauce.

"No one's eating until we find them," Steve said.

Rusty scowled. "We could make them do the dishes or something later."

Steve shot him a look that clearly said, 'don't question me.' "That's a good idea, Rusty. Put the food away, please."

"Yes sir," Rusty rolled his eyes, placing the half-opened can on the ground and covering the lid with a rag.

Within five minutes, the counselors and campers had grabbed

their flashlights and formed search parties.

"I have the feeling we'll find them in no time, nuzzling around like a couple of opossums," Johnny said, pronouncing the 'o' and puzzling everyone who heard.

"When you find them, sneak up and scare the hell out of those losers!" Steve pointed toward the woods, leading his group as if they were an army going to battle.

3

The stars began to peep through the sky surrounding the full moon as the sun inched toward the edge of the western horizon. A warm breeze made several go-rounds. The sand sparkled in the blushing, pink-orange sunset. A great field of reflecting water sent ruffling waves at their feet. Trees lined the edges of the beach, forming silhouettes in front of the dimming sky.

Meg removed her boots, digging her toes into the sand. Her four companions did so as well.

"Brendan! Deanna!" They hollered, though they did not expect the two mischief-makers to run out of the bushes asking "*What?*"

Only seagulls responded. The breeze massaged their skin. Every breath of salted air they took was a pleasure. They picked up shells along the way, holding them to their ears so they could

listen to the hollow echoes within.

A half-hour passed, and Meg wondered why they hadn't met Rusty's group on the western end of the island. She looked ahead, but didn't see a northern curve, just sparkling water clawing over the sand in ruffles.

They're just fine, Meg thought, shaking off a head rush.

...

"Where the *fuck* is the end?" Rusty led Billy, Shawn, and Jason along the northern beach.

"Screw those two, anyway," Billy said, kicking up sand.

"I think they're busy doing that to each other," Shawn said.

"That's why we should leave them alone. What are we supposed to do? While they're having intercourse say, 'Come on, you're holding up dinner!'" Rusty pictured himself taking a swing at Steve and bloodying his nose, then kicking him in the crotch as he lay on the ground. The thought caught him by surprise, because he knew he only had violent tendencies when he was drinking. Though he hadn't had any alcohol in eight months, the sudden jolt of anger made him feel as if he had taken a couple of shots of vodka while in a room full of people who pissed him off.

"We better check the sand for ass prints," Billy said. "That

would be a clue."

"How big is this island?" Shawn asked.

"Like three square miles," Rusty grumbled, hoping there would be enough light when he returned so he wouldn't have to cook dinner with a lantern. When he did it that way, even more bugs would fly around because they were attracted to both the light and the food.

"*Brendan!*" Jason yelled toward the woods.

"Don't even bother," Rusty said. "We should meet Meg's group soon on the western end, and Brendan and Deanna will be back at the campsite wondering where everyone else is."

Darkness crept over the edges of sunlight between the ocean and sky in the west. Looking east, Rusty could no longer see the horizon, just the sky and the ocean merged into one. Darkened waves washed over dry sand before pulling back and returning.

4

It may have been a trick of the shadows, but the trees looked dead, like a forest fire had its way, leaving black bark and crippled leafless branches with points sharp enough to puncture flesh. Even amongst companions, their skin jittered as they stepped deeper into the forest, feeling as if they were

being watched.

Johnny led three campers who followed directly behind him, while David lagged behind. Their flashlights shined in all directions, aimed at the sounds of nearby cracking branches and rustling leaves. They saw nothing but swarms of bugs crossing through the beams.

"You all okay?" Johnny asked, glancing over his shoulder.

"Fine," they mumbled.

Crickets chirped. The stench of something foul swished through their nostrils. Branches crackled nearby and their lights fell onto a squealing four-legged animal hurrying through their path.

"Holy *shit* that scared me."

"Don't worry, it's just a boar," Johnny said. "I'm surprised to see that around here."

"Do they hurt people?" Suzzie asked.

"No, duh, they're just wild pigs," David said.

"I was asking Johnny!"

"Shhh. Calm down," Johnny said as he hit the head of his Mag-lite, wondering why it was dimming and flickering despite having brand new alkaline batteries.

Then a pale-skinned leg entered the light's beam, a shoe attached and red shorts pulled down to the ankles.

"Deanna!" Suzzie yelled as their lights fell onto her. Scrapes lined her legs and around her thighs.

Screams followed but a snap in Johnny's head diluted every sound. He ran up and knelt by her side, feeling for a heartbeat though she was clearly breathing. Reddish bubbles of saliva popped over her lips.

"Bruce? You okay?" Johnny spoke inches from her face.

"Johnny, that's Deanna!"

Johnny shook his head and looked at her again. Her left eye was swollen shut and her hair was a scraggly mess.

Deanna. He stripped off his shirt, balled it up and wedged it beneath her head.

Everyone bunched together, watching their backs in case her attacker was still there, ready to pounce on them from the bushes.

Johnny grabbed the first-aid kit from his waist-pack, pushed aside several bandages until he found a bottle of iodine and a gauze pad.

Damn gooks are back...

He squirted the iodine on the pad and dabbed the reddest of the scrapes that extended up her thigh.

Her eyes opened and she began groaning.

"Deanna, we're here!" Suzzie cried as Deanna's whitened face shivered in their flickering streams of light.

She was suddenly quiet again as someone screamed in the distance. Johnny grabbed the whistle from his waist-pack.

Pweet pweet pweet, pwееееet pwееееet pwееееet, pweet pweet pweet.

Damn gooks'll hear! Where's my radio?

And in return: *Pweet pweet pweet, pwееееet pwееееet pwееееet, pweet pweet pweet.*

"They're in trouble, too," Johnny said as he pulled up Deanna's shorts, and then lifted her body so her hips rested over his shoulder.

The campers followed as Johnny hurried toward the sound of the whistle. *Pweet pweet pweet, pwееееet pwееееet pwееееet, pweet pweet pweet.*

5

"Ohmygod! Ohmygod no! God no!"

A body sprawled over a bush, splattered with blood that had

gushed from a crater in his mid-section, turning his white T-shirt auburn. Lines stretched the length of his face, neck, arms and legs.

One of the girls pointed him out, a slight delay before she screamed loud enough to make her throat hoarse for days to come. The other campers stood still, saying "*Oh my god...*" repeatedly again while staring at the body in the dim gleam of their flashlights.

"Everyone, get near me!" Steve barked as the campers huddled around him. He heard the call of S.O.S. no more than 50 yards away. He grabbed for his whistle and did the same.

"Ohmygod! ... Ohmygod! Ohmygod! Ohmygod!"

Their flashlights remained on Brendan's body.

"Steve!" someone shouted in the distance.

"Johnny!" Steve yelled back.

"We're coming!" Johnny yelled.

"Wait here for a minute," Steve said. "Don't shine your flashlight on him!"

A moment later, the campers turned to see Johnny, shirtless, hurrying toward them with a pair of legs hanging over his shoulder, followed by his group. "We found Deanna!"

Then he and his group saw Brendan. They froze, jaws dropping.

As the campers in his group started crying and panicking, Johnny laid Deanna onto the clearing with his shirt beneath her head. Steve rushed to her side, spilling canteen water over her lips.

Deanna coughed out some of the water before her eyes fluttered open.

She muttered something.

"*Who did this?*" Steve grasped her shoulders as she shut her eyes again.

Johnny pulled Brendan from the bushes and laid him on the ground, feeling for a pulse beneath his jaw. Nothing.

Bruce.

Blood filled his mouth like a teacup of tomato juice. His eyes gawked as if he were staring at a freight train closing in on him. Stripes of blood lined his face. The cluttered hole through his mid-section looked as if a knife - or something larger - had gouged through.

"What? You can't tell he's dead by looking at him?" Steve said. "There's no point in taking his pulse now! Let's get back

to the plane!"

"Wait. We're taking him," Johnny said.

"There's someone else out there, Johnny! We gotta get the hell outta here!"

Johnny gave Steve a hard, serious stare. "You ain't doing this to me *again*, lieutenant."

What the hell is he talking about? Steve thought, bending over to lift Deanna. He stuck one arm beneath her knees and the other under her back and lifted, still holding his flashlight.

Johnny quickly put his shirt back on, and then pulled an emergency blanket, folded up in a rectangle, out of his waist-pack. He unfolded it like wrapping paper. With the help of a few weeping campers, he slid the cover over Brendan, getting blood on his hands like fingerpaint.

"Come on, we're heading back," Johnny said.

They turned toward the forest, heads scanning the woods for movement. Five minutes passed as they walked close together, hands on each other's shoulders.

Until a loud, chopper-like whir sputtered to life from abroad...

"What's that?"

"Is it the plane?"

"It sounds like... the plane," Johnny said. "*Jesus Christ... George!*"

Looking east, their hearts sank even further as adjacent red bulbs ascended into the black starry sky.

6

George Kraser expected everyone back within 15 minutes, but after a half-hour of waiting, he began to get nervous. Not because he sat alone in the darkening campsite, but because it began to sink in that he had landed on the wrong island, *a bigger island*.

It all started two hours into the flight over the Pacific, in the GH-C4 aircraft. That model plane had been used to transport troops and small loads of cargo to places without concrete runways. A year later, the Army purchased newer models that used only two-thirds the fuel of the GH-C4. Adventure Flights Inc. - George's employer - bought six of them at an auction. Then Jack Rachel paid the company to lug the campers back and forth each week to his private island in the eastern Pacific.

George flew the plane to the location that he only knew by

the coordinates. He had met with others who had been there on a similar aircraft, and they said the eastern end was perfect for a GH-C4 landing. They were correct, except he had far more runway space than they had claimed.

...

"Where the hell did that come from?"

A great wall of fog covered the western sky like a mountain range, stretching several thousand feet above the horizon and as far to either side as George could see. The weather satellite, when he looked at it only two hours earlier, showed clear skies between Los Angeles and the island only 900 miles off the shore.

"We gotta fly into that?" Johnny asked from the copilot's seat.

"We gotta descend into that."

George radioed back to the airport. They told him that some clouds indeed began compiling with minor precipitation, but it was only a narrow stretch and it wouldn't take the plane more than five minutes to fly through it.

Thirty minutes later, as the plane got closer, George couldn't help but think that something was wrong. The fog looked a lot thicker than they had said. He felt like he was steering a

bug into a giant castle of smoke, and it was too late to ascend over it. They were getting closer to the island, so he had to descend, anyway.

The plane flew straight into it, and suddenly he couldn't see anything but clouds.

Rain fell. A few campers yelled from the back but Steve told them to calm down. "We're almost there," George said, squinting, seeing light ahead.

"George, what's happening here?" Johnny asked. The numbers on the G.P.S. began scrolling like milliseconds on a digital watch.

George slapped the box as if he were trying to fix the display on an old television. Nothing happened.

"The storm's interfering with the signal," he said.

Thunder rumbled and a bolt of lightning flashed in front of them.

"Shit," George murmured.

"There it is!" Johnny said, pointing straight ahead as the fog began clearing.

George squinted, seeing land that looked like an unmarked football field stretching from the beach.

"Holy shit that popped out of nowhere," he said. "I'm gonna have to pull back around to get the angle."

The G.P.S. was blank.

But the island was right there in front of them.

...

"This has to be it!" George said to the empty campsite. The island had a radius of two and a half square miles, and there was no way those two campers, or any of the others, would have gotten lost. He heard no whistles, no noises, nothing but the tropical winds crackling the surfaces of the blue tarps.

"I'm paranoid," he said, hopping up from the log. He walked to the plane.

George entered through the rear ramp and made his way to the cockpit. He flicked on the outside lights so the others could see when they returned. A swarm of bugs came right for the beams as if they had been waiting for George to flip the switch. Beyond that, he saw the long stretch of grassy runway headed toward the ocean, the beach in between.

He sat in the pilot's seat for a moment, as his stomach grumbled. There was plenty of food in the coolers behind him, but Johnny and Rusty had rationed it so there would be enough for

everyone. They wouldn't miss a granola bar. He got up and turned toward the back.

Through the rear entrance stood shirtless tribal men, gripping spears, forming a semicircle around the back of the plane.

George was too stunned to scream. All he could do was stare as they marched up the ramp in a single-file line, like disciplined pirates boarding an unguarded vessel. There were at least a dozen of them. Maybe two dozen. They all stared at him, savagery in their eyes.

While they situated themselves in the back, one man stepped up to him, crowned with the top half of a skull. Twine straps held it onto his scalp. The bones surrounding the empty eyes were wearing thin and broken off completely at the top. Nubs of what used to be teeth hung over his forehead like the rim of a helmet.

He saw in the corner of his eye that the other men had found the fold-down seats along the walls, while others sat on the floor with their legs crossed. A younger one found Rusty's acoustic guitar and began strumming. They laughed and pointed at the pilot's safari shorts that were darkening at the crotch.

"What do you want from me? I don't have anything!" George

suddenly found words to say but certainly didn't think before speaking. More horrid laughter came from the heathens.

The hoisted fist of the skull-crowned man shot to the air, silencing them at once. The warrior king's scowl didn't change as he began flapping his arms like a bird.

"What're you doing?" he said. *"W-what? You want me to take off?"*

The leader stopped flapping his arms, then pointed through the window toward the beach.

Oh God help me!

George looked at the rear ramp, hoping he wouldn't have to explain to them that it needed to be shut if he were to take off. They didn't budge, so turned around and pushed a button.

Every tribesman jumped as the floor began rising, shrinking the exit as if they were in the mouth of a giant beast. One man began screaming and tried to dive out, but another grabbed him by the arm and pulled him back inside.

As George sat in the pilot's seat, the skull-crowned man hovered over him. He felt a lasting chill in the back of his neck, like a bite of icy teeth grinding deep inside him.

George leaned forward, flipping a few switches that spurred

the engines to life. Then the tribesmen howled, applauding the awakening of the wings.

The skull-crowned man smirked affirmatively, almost thankfully.

7

The trip back seemed like the longest walk of their lives. They held hands, weeping and sobbing. When Johnny's group returned, Steve was already there, sitting on a log, staring into the forest as if he were guarding the campground. Deanna's bare feet, facing down on her sleeping bag, stuck out of her shelter.

Johnny dropped Brendan's wrapped body at the edge of the woods, then headed straight for the runway. Everyone else sat around the shelters, elbows on their knees and hands on their cheeks.

The smell of spent fuel lingered from the plane. With his light scanning the area around where it had been parked, Johnny found several footprints in the dirt. He placed his boot next to one of them. The prints were roughly the same size as his own - even while wearing size 10 boots.

Wheel marks skidded from where the plane had started, extending about 60 yards in the patchy grass until they faded on

the terrain and eventually disappeared.

Neither Meg nor Rusty's group made it to the western tip of the island - they retreated the moment they heard the roar of the plane's engine and saw its blinking lights ascend into the sky. They arrived back at the campsite soon after Johnny's group, running to the others for explanations.

"Maybe if we just let those two alone none of this would've happened!" Rusty said, making sure he spoke loud enough for Steve to hear.

"Rusty!" Johnny yelled from the field. "Come here! You too, Meg! Steve!" Rusty and Meg rushed over.

"I'm busy, Johnny." Steve didn't even turn around. He sat on the edge of the camp, staring into the woods.

"This is important, Steve, I suggest you get over here," Johnny said. By that time Meg and Rusty stood by him, but the head counselor didn't budge.

"I'll be there in a minute," Steve said.

"We found Brendan in the woods, dead. And Deanna raped," Johnny said.

There was a delayed reaction before Meg gasped. She stared at the counselor, hoping he was just playing a very cruel joke.

Rusty knew instantly that Johnny was telling the truth.

"George didn't steal the plane. It was hijacked." Johnny pointed his flashlight at the footprints.

"*Shit*," Rusty said.

"By the looks of these prints, at least three different people were here but took off."

Rusty put his arm around Meg as fresh tears streamed down her face. They could hear the campers crying and panicking as they heard the news.

"I need you two to go comfort them. I'll handle Steve," Johnny said.

Meg and Rusty joined the campers as Johnny jogged over to the head counselor, who sat silently, looking into the forest.

"Steve..."

"I'm keeping lookout right now. That's why I'm facing the woods, Johnny, so if anyone comes I'll be the first to know. What did you think, I was sitting around doing nothing?"

"Do us a favor, help us comfort the campers."

"Safety first, Johnny."

What the hell is he gonna do to protect us? Johnny thought, walking away.

Steve saw two campers stroll to the spot where Johnny had dumped Brendan. *What the hell?*

He got up to get a better view. "Hey, get away from there!"

"But we just wanted to..."

"I said get your asses away from there now!"

Billy and Shawn walked back to the campsite, and Steve watched them to make sure.

...

Dim orange light brightened the camp as Johnny added sticks and branches to the fire.

"What are we gonna do about dinner?" Rusty asked. "We've got tomato sauce and pasta. The rest of the fucking food was on the plane."

Then he saw that ants had crawled up the side of the can and lined the opened rim.

"Damn it!"

Rusty swept them away with his finger, cutting his skin on the edge.

"Easy, Rusty, everything is gonna be okay," Johnny said.

"It's not okay, we're gonna starve out here..."

"Shhh! We don't need to make things worse than they are. And

if there were other people here, they must have food." Johnny had that disappointed look in his eyes, the same look he got after customers returned several hundred dollars worth of merchandise after obviously using it.

"How..." Rusty began but caught himself before he did make things worse. He squeezed a drop of blood from his finger.

"Does anyone have any food?" Johnny asked loudly. "If you do, bring it here. We're gonna have to share."

"We better cook at least some of this pasta," Rusty said, keeping the ants and the drop of blood on the seal of the can his little secret.

"Cook about half," Johnny said as a few campers dropped off various snack items, then waited to see what else would be added to the pile. In the end, there were a dozen Snickers bars, several beef-jerky sticks, a pile of assorted candies, and three packs of mint-flavored breath mints.

...

Meg saw a camper sitting alone on the edge of the forest, just beyond the borders of the fire's glow. She approached.

"Hey, kiddo, are you all right?" she asked, sitting next to him.

"Yeah."

"What's your name again?"

"David."

"That's right. I have a hard time remembering names at first. Are you scared?"

"No."

"It's all right." Meg put her hand on his back, seeing his sulking eyes staring at the ground.

"Why are you sitting over here?"

"I don't know."

"Come on back with the rest of us and get some dinner. I know you're upset. We all are, but we'll be rescued soon. Did you know Brendan?"

"No."

Meg's eyes watered. "Come back with the rest of us. Come on, I insist."

She stood, tugging on David's arm. They walked back together.

Poor kid, Meg thought.

Rusty and Meg cleaned the pots while some of the campers

scrubbed the remains of tomato sauce off of their aluminum mess kits. Others retreated to their sleeping bags, curling up inside like caterpillars in cocoons, the only protection they had from the monsters that lurked in the woods.

"Brendan's momma won't wanna see him like this," Johnny said with a cigarette between his lips. He slowly inhaled, holding the smoke in his mouth for a moment. His eyes shut and his head tilted backward. Rolling his tongue, he blew into the air, opening his eyelids only after the smoke had hovered away from view. In the sky, he saw stars spiraling toward him before retracting, like hundreds of bright yo-yos coming down from the heavens.

"Johnny?"

"Yes sir?"

"He'll be buried on American soil like everyone else. Don't give me shit about burying anyone here!"

"Johnny?"

"Huh?" His eyes fell back to earth. Steve was sitting there on a log across from him.

"Are you saying we should bury him?"

"Yeah, I insist." Johnny was now staring into the fire.

Steve shrugged. "Whatever."

They sat there for a moment, hearing Meg and Rusty in the background talking to the campers. Johnny looked at his watch. It was only 11 o'clock, and it seemed like the night would never end. He knew he would have a hard time sleeping and eventually have to rely on utter fatigue to knock him unconscious. Perhaps digging that hole would help him along.

"The people who hijacked the plane didn't wear shoes," Johnny said.

"So?"

"So they must be a tribe, I guess."

"Tribes like that don't exist," Steve said as if he were unsure.

Johnny looked at the head counselor to see if he was being serious. "North Sentinel Island, near India. Saw a documentary on it. Totally isolated. Imagine that! In the day of computers, cell phones and all that electronic mumbo-jumbo, there's still people living like that!"

"On this island? It's not that big, Johnny! They couldn't possibly survive here."

"Your guess is as good as mine," he said, tossing the

dark-yellow filter of his cigarette into the fire and pulling out another. He offered one to Steve, who took it.

"Damn, now I'm starting this shit again," Steve said, flipping a flame on his lighter.

"Well, now's the best time to do it. Just like Nam was the best time to do drugs. At least my platoon got some last-minute jollies before that ambush." Johnny paused for a moment. "Us survivors fell to the ground and pretended we were dead. That odor hasn't left my memory - that mixture of gunpowder and blood."

"I've had to put up with some sick stuff of my own." Steve slowly blew out smoke before continuing. "When I was a lifeguard, people letting their young kids jump in the deep end... retards that kept falling under... damn teens throwing each other in and diving on top of old ladies..."

"But no one was trying to kill you." Johnny regretted saying that the moment it came out.

"I'm trying to say that I had other people's lives in my hands, Johnny. One little girl died in the baby pool. Her idiot mother went to the bathroom and left her alone. Some kids horse-playing in the pool distracted me. At the same time the

girl drowned in one foot of water. I pulled her out and did CPR but it was too late. Finally her mother comes walking out and starts screaming. That bitch sued me, and lost."

Johnny sat and listened, vowing to start being selective about what he said around Steve to keep him from ranting. "I don't think either of us will get in trouble for this trip, though. If anyone, Rachel is gonna get sued."

"Yeah, but it really wasn't his fault. He hired us to take care of business. It's George's fault."

"Be careful making assumptions," Johnny said, knowing instantly that he'd have to make a huge effort to keep calm around this man, who kept topping himself every time he opened his mouth.

"Johnny, they scouted out the island and I think they would've told Rachel if there were barefoot tribesmen hanging out."

"That doesn't mean it's George's fault."

"But what if he flew us to the wrong island?" Steve asked. Johnny started to answer but Steve continued. "You told me that G.P.S. was busted when we landed."

"Well, the important thing now is that the right island

would probably be west of here, and rescue would have to pass over this one." Johnny saw a glimmer of firelight reflecting off the body bag about 30 yards away. He was tired of arguing with Steve. "Hey, I'm gonna get started on that hole."

"Johnny?"

"What?"

"Go get some rest. We'll dig the hole together tomorrow morning. I'll keep guard now."

"Thanks. But I'm not tired." Johnny threw the remainder of his cigarette into the fire, then headed to the tent to get his shovel.

"Suit yourself," Steve said, flicking ashes.

...

"White people be crazy!"

Billy and Shawn were belly-down on sleeping bags, leaning on their elbows beneath a tarp with a deck of cards. They screwed off the top of a mini-Maglite and placed it between them.

"Oh man, you are so white. It's more like this," Billy said. *"White people be cray-zeeee! White people be readin the newspaper while takin a shit. You ain't nevah seen no brothas do dat."*

"Do what?" Shawn said. "Readin?"

"Gin." Billy slammed down his card.

"Dammit."

"You guys are so rude!" someone said from a shelter on the girls' end, about 20 yards across the campsite.

Billy peaked around the tarp. "Shut up!"

"Billy! Come here!" Rusty sat up from his sleeping bag, which he spread on the ground outside his shelter.

"What?" The camper didn't budge.

"I said come here!"

Billy took his time getting up, then walked over barefoot.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Rusty sat on his knees.

"Playing cards. You want in?"

Rusty was about to scream, but caught himself and took a deep breath. "Can you please try to go to sleep?"

"How the hell are we supposed to sleep now?" Billy held short of a laugh. "One kid gets killed, another raped, and the plane was jacked and you're telling us to sleep? We're trying to keep our minds off it."

Rusty paused. The kid had a point, he thought, even if he was a *trouble-making ass*. "At least stay quiet, will ya?"

Billy rejoined Shawn and picked up his cards. "You didn't cheat, did you?"

Rusty laid on top of his sleeping bag, looking at the stars through the tree branches, thinking about what caused the mess they were in... not about the unknown people being on the island, or the plane being hijacked, but why Brendan and Deanna went into the woods in the first place. Everyone noticed how the two teens hit it off when they met that morning at the airport. They flirted almost the entire time. Chances were, their hormones went nuts and they couldn't wait any longer, so they frolicked hand-in-hand into the forest like Adam and Eve, no reason to wait until marriage, or even nightfall for that matter.

It reminded Rusty of one of his flings. The same day he met a pierced-face pink-haired 16-year-old runaway, he knocked her up. At least that's what she said when they ran into each other at a liquor store a month later.

Rusty's face reddened and his heartbeat quickened, just as they always did when he thought about it. He never found out if she had the child. Somehow he doubted it, guessing the girl was either lying or had an abortion, assuming it was even his. Either way, he knew that one drunken fling wasn't worth the price of

uncertainty, if at all.

Regardless, Brendan and Deanna suffered far worse consequences, and Rusty would wonder for the rest of his life whether Brendan would be alive and Deanna not violated had he attempted to stand in their way. Sure, whoever they were would have done something else, but perhaps something less lethal.

That thought bit at him, creating a throbbing sting in his head like a hangover, even as he drifted off to sleep.

...

Johnny dug in the moonlight.

He had with him his Trail-mate portable spade, which he sold for \$14.99 at his store. If the earlier storm had softened the ground any, the sun had long since dried it. He couldn't stand digging dry earth because it took more effort, but mud wasn't much easier because it clung to the shovel and he would waste just as much energy banging it off as scooping it out. Giant earthworms that resembled foot-long hotdogs slithered through the soil. At first he thought they were thin snakes, until he chopped one in half and saw both parts still moving.

He dug and he dug and he dug, determined to get the body in the hole and covered before sunrise. With each toss of dirt, he

felt a crick in his shoulder, the same one he felt the first time this happened. That wouldn't stop him from digging, though.

Unless Jesus Christ came down from Heaven and took the shovel out of his hands, he wouldn't stop. He would rest only when the hole was deep enough this time to give Bruce a proper burial.

Brendan, he thought.

No shallow grave for his man this time. He wouldn't have been surprised if the grave he dug in Vietnam had eroded, exposing the bones that he had covered late one night against his lieutenant's orders. Some kid would be running around and trip over the American soldier's skull that had been wasting away in that sand for several decades.

An hour later, Johnny took one last plunge of earth and topped off the hill.

Brendan, he thought.

By morning the hole would be halfway filled with water, and he would have to scoop it out with the cooking pot.

...

Deanna laid in her sleeping bag but she wouldn't have known the difference between there and the center of the woods. Mucus and tears covered her face. She felt the lingering effects of the

rapist in her body, as if he were still on top of her, thrusting away. Her head trounced, pain spreading like ivy, constricting around every wrinkle in her brain. She closed her eyes, sniffing, crying, and feeling the dropped lump in her throat.

I was raped...

Raped.

Raped.

She screamed and sprang up, sweat soaking her body, and heart pounding. She grabbed her face, grinding all ten pink-painted nails into her skin, tearing.

Until someone grabbed her arms, pinning them to the ground. She didn't dare open her eyes, giving into the pressure, waiting to be raped yet again. The person let go and patted her shoulders.

...

Most campers huddled in their sleeping bags, recalling every detail of the day. They thought about that morning when they said goodbye to their parents at the airport, the take-off, the flight, the storm that greeted them, the bumpy landing, all the way to that dreadful moment. They kept their eyes open, afraid that someone would jump from the woods and stab them through

their sleeping bag. All they saw were little mice running around the campsite.

Meg cried into her mini pillow, feeling the warmth of her breath against her face. Her digital watch, set one time zone behind Western, beeped twice as midnight came. Then she thought she heard screams coming from deep within the forest.

9

They woke to the noise of rain on their tarps and felt the dampness seep into the openings of their sleeping bags. Fog covered the sky, brightening by the minute as the sun rose behind it.

Few spoke as they followed Steve and Meg down the field toward the beach, stopping at a body-sized hole in the ground.

A lone pallbearer, Johnny approached carrying the heat-reflecting blanket across his arms, Brendan Johnson's body within. He rolled the bag into the hole, which still had a bit of water in it. The corpse landed sideways, legs bent, a lock of brown hair sticking out of the opening.

Steve spoke. "Brendan, most of us here didn't get a chance to know you, but we are deeply saddened by your untimely death." A few seconds passed. "We are so sorry it happened... May you now

enter eternal glory with God in Heaven." He made the sign of the cross. Others did so as well.

Johnny removed the tarp off the top of the small hill next to the hole, then jammed his shovel in and pulled out a scoop of dirt. It made a crumpling noise as it hit the bag.

"Okay everyone, this morning we're gonna be gathering as much firewood as we can without wondering too far from the campsite," Steve said, losing the eulogizing tone. "Let's go."

As Steve and Rusty led the teens back to the campground, Meg stayed behind with Johnny. "You need help with that?"

"Nah," he lied, feeling a headache creeping in - the pain he got only when he didn't have his coffee. He drank at least two cups - black - every morning, and had been doing so for the past 25 years. The one day he needed it most, it was stashed in a red satchel in the front corner of a hijacked plane. He settled for a cigarette, holding it between his lips as he continued digging.

Meg could see the pain in Johnny's weather-beaten face as his eyes concentrated on tossing another shovel-full of dirt into the grave. She sniffled.

Johnny looked up and saw tears lining her eyelids, falling. "You okay, Meg?"

"Yeah," she said, gulping.

Johnny took a drag off of his cigarette, then pulled it out of his mouth. "Steve and I are gonna head into the woods to see if there's anyone else here."

"What? No! You can't do that!" Her soft, dreary voice disappeared. "They might still be out there! They might kill you!"

"We gotta find out..."

"They're killers!"

"Meg, calm down please."

"How am I supposed to calm down? We have a responsibility to these kids, Johnny! You can't just leave them!"

"We're stranded, Meg. We don't have any choice." He jammed the shovel into the dirt and stepped to her. "We don't know what's out there. What we do know is that people lived on this island, Meg. People *survived* here. And if we're gonna survive until rescue comes, we're gonna have to use what they left."

"You ready?" Steve approached from the campsite, wondering why Johnny was standing so close to Meg.

"As soon as I finish filling this hole," Johnny said, lifting the shovel and tossing in more dirt.

"Why don't you just get Rusty to do it?" Steve asked, seeing that the body bag wasn't even covered yet.

"Come on now..."

"Steve, you might get killed!" Tears lined Meg's face over the dried streaks of old ones.

Steve rested his hands on her shoulders. "We're not gonna get killed. I promise."

Meg stared back at him, then buried her head into his chest as he hugged her.

"I just want you guys to be careful. Please."

"Don't worry, Meg." Johnny sucked in some smoke and flicked the ashes. "We've been through worse."

Johnny really wanted to say '*I've been through worse.*' Based on how Steve handled the past 12 hours, there's no way he knew what worse was. Vietnam was worse. Fighting yellow men for a reason he couldn't understand was worse. Here, Johnny understood.

"You're in charge now," Steve said, releasing his grip on Meg but leaving his hands on her arms.

"We can't go looking for you if you don't return." Meg didn't even want to consider them not returning, but knew she had to prepare for that possibility.

"That won't happen," Steve said, then looked at Johnny, who resumed shoveling. "Come on, let's go. Forget about the hole."

Johnny looked at the body bag and the hill of dirt. He couldn't just leave it like that. He didn't dump Bruce's body in a hole and leave it uncovered.

Meg could see the disgust in Johnny's face and his reluctance to put down the shovel.

"Come on, man, you can do it later," Steve said with his hands on his hips.

"Johnny, I'll finish it," Meg jumped in, grabbing the shovel from his hands. Johnny gave it up without protest, and glanced back into the unfilled grave before walking away.

Before Meg began shoveling dirt into the hole, she watched the two counselors head north around the cloudy beach before they cut into the woods.

10

Johnny frequently shifted his head as he walked through the forest, and even glanced down every few steps to make sure he didn't step on anything unusual.

"Uh, Johnny, what's with the hands?"

Positioned as if clenching a gun, finger on the trigger,

Johnny un-balled his fists and dropped them to his side.

"You need a cigarette, man," Steve said, but Johnny was already pulling two from his shirt pocket, and handed one to the head counselor.

"Hope you've got enough to last the rest of the trip." Steve flicked his lighter.

"Shhh!" Johnny's head whirled around as a boar went scampering through the bushes, squealing. Then he spun in a defensive stance, his unlit cigarette dropping from his lips, but no one was there.

"Jesus, you're more paranoid than me, man." Steve picked up Johnny's cigarette and handed it to him.

"That's how the ambush started," Johnny said as he pulled out his lighter and struck a flame over the tip of his cigarette.

"Huh?"

"In Nam. Gooks ambushed us the second we lost focus."

"This isn't Nam, Johnny," Steve said.

"You're damn right this isn't Nam. In Nam I knew what could happen to me the moment my number was called. Here, I haven't a clue."

For the first time that morning, the sun's beam broke

through the clouds. Moments later, insects resumed swarming, going right for the two men walking through their territory.

"So, who in the hell would be living here?" Steve asked, strapping on his Oakley sunglasses.

"I saw several footprints, and they were different sizes. There's a million different possibilities and we might never know what really happened."

Another boar scurried and squealed its way through the foliage before it disappeared down what looked to be an overgrown trail. The grass was pushed to either side and the middle roots appeared to be stamped over several times.

"Boars don't just exist on small islands like this. People had to have brought them here to breed." Johnny kept his eyes focused, trying to look through the leaves of every bush for any movement.

"And why's that?" Steve said, not really caring to hear an answer.

"In case they passed by again and needed food, or got shipwrecked. Maybe whoever lives here brought them along and let them run wild."

"Maybe we can hunt one later," Steve said, holding his

finger like a gun, pulling the trigger.

Johnny stopped.

"What's wrong?" Steve asked.

"We ought to climb a tree. See what's ahead." Johnny looked around for something sturdy enough to hold him.

"I'll do it." Steve grabbed the first tree he saw that had a few extra knobs in the bark. He threw his arms around and Johnny gave him a boost. His hiking boots dug into the bark as he scooted his way up, chafing his inner thighs. The leaves and branches rustled above.

Steve was about 15 feet up when a bird chirped and flew from the branch beside his head. He turned to see three hatchlings cradled next to two eggs.

"Hey Johnny! There's baby birds up here!"

"Hurry up!" Johnny said in a projected whisper, keeping his eyes at sea-level.

Prick, Steve thought, pulling himself up a few more branches and poking his head through a patch of leaves. His eyes shifted from one side of the island to the other. Above the trees, he could see the cloudy horizon of the western ocean. Then he looked over the path, seeing a shortage of leaves in one part, like a

gully in the treetops.

"Southwest of here." Steve took another glance at the ocean but didn't notice any more islands, though he couldn't see much through the fog.

"What do you see?"

"An open area. Might be a lake, though." He slid past the chirping baby birds. Annoyed with the bark scrapping his thighs, he jumped the remaining eight feet, bending his knees as he landed.

...

They walked southwest for another ten minutes before coming to a thicket of bushes and overgrown ivy. Behind the greenery, Steve and Johnny could see trimmed wood lining vertically like a log cabin, and light coming from behind it.

Walking north along the wall for a moment, Johnny spotted an opening between twin trees. There was a wooden gate flat on the ground beside it.

Suddenly, his nostrils flared as he caught a whiff of a rotting stench. *Oh my god somebody died*, he thought, but not a muscle in him told him to retreat.

Then they saw what was inside.

His fists clenched, finger on the trigger.

Lined side-by-side, long poles stuck through the bottoms of five slaughtered men. Two of them had their eyes and mouths gaping toward the sky as if calling to the gods for mercy as they stood on the tips of their toes like bloody ballerinas. Two others had fallen to their knees as the poles slid far out of their mouths with globs of innards clinging to the points. The fifth man had toppled over after his pole snapped at the base, the splintered end sticking from his buttocks like a stiff tail. Then Johnny and Steve saw a sixth man behind them with a gash in the back of his skull, lying in a darkened puddle of blood and dirt.

There was a circle of stacked stones in the center of the village. Johnny was relieved to see no smoke rising from the black ashes within.

"Let's get Meg and Rusty," Steve said.

"No way. Look at those guys. That's worse than what Christ went through!" Sometimes Johnny had nightmares about bullets peppering his skin or bombs blowing off his limbs, but being speared through the anus and displayed like a trophy seemed worse than dying in a bloody mess.

He kept staring, wondering how all of it happened. The poles looked to have been inserted while the victims were still on the ground, shoved deep enough so they'd slide in further while being lifted. If the sharp end got stuck, a quick shift of the body and tug of the feet would've done the trick. At least two feet of the pole stuck from holes in the ground; any less and they would have snapped at the base, like the one. It didn't seem to be a coincidence that the poles exited the mouths - that would have taken careful coordination. There was also the possibility that they were killed before they were poled, then lined up like scarecrows to keep away evil spirits, but Johnny thought otherwise. The crucifixion wouldn't have been the same if Jesus and company were nailed to the crosses after they died, nor did it seem that even primitive tribesmen would go through the trouble of standing up these characters if they were already dead. Or maybe they would.

"Then let's take some of their things," Steve said, motioning Johnny to the nearest shelter.

"There's way too many homes here." On second glance, Johnny estimated there were 40 wood and straw huts around the edges of the fenced-in village. Cloths with stenciled designs covered some

of the entrances, while others were unhooked and draped to the side. He could smell a strong herbal scent coming from a nearby hut, probably used to cover up the smell of the corpses. He didn't see anyone, nor did he hear anyone, but someone was there, watching, ready to ambush them.

"Come on, you go in, I'll keep guard," Steve said.

The entrance was about three feet high and three feet wide. Johnny unhooked a corner, turned on his flashlight, ducked his head and peered inside.

"Good God!" The Maglite's beam hit the pulsating pop-belly of a naked woman, who was leaning against the back wall with her legs spread. She tried to scream, but it got lost in a hoarse throat.

"What?" Steve bent over to look inside.

"I think she's about to give birth!" Johnny squatted through the door with his knees bent.

"What are you doing? Are you *nuts*? Are you *insane*, Johnny? Get your ass out here! We're getting the hell out of here!"

"I ain't leaving her this time!" Johnny said as he scooted closer. Some light shined through an uncovered hole in the ceiling, but it wasn't until he pointed his flashlight between

her legs when he saw fluid soaking into the ground. The woman breathed intensely and sweat poured down her face.

"Holy *shit!*" Steve said as he ducked his head inside.

I think I can do this, Johnny thought, remembering when he helped deliver Sissy and Russ in his home with the doctor's supervision. But there was also that time when he almost learned on his own with that refugee.

"*Push, push!*" Johnny had his hands between the woman's thighs as her gasps quickened.

Steve heard noise and spun around, confronting the tips of spears held by four bare-chested women. They had a reddish-brown tinge to their skin, hip-length black hair, some braided, and wore grass skirts with twine knotted around their waists. A couple of them had shawls covering their heads. Their eyes were thin, and their breasts...

"*Torana!*" a young, smooth-skinned woman yelled, followed by other foreign words. Unlike the others, she didn't carry a spear, and she was the only one who wore a lei of flowers around her neck. Steve swore she was smiling at him.

"*Johnny, we're cornered here!*" Steve said as more women approached from all angles. The ones late to arrive didn't have

spears, and looked more shocked and interested than frightened to see the intruder.

Where'd they come from so fast? he wondered as his eyes fell to their perky breasts.

"I ain't leaving her this time!" Johnny yelled from inside the shelter.

A tall, muscular woman pushed her way through the crowd, grabbing for Steve's wrist. He pulled away and began reaching for the back of his shorts, under his shirt.

"*Veema!*" someone called, and the brutish woman stepped away from him. She cleared the crowd, barking instructions and yelling, "*Torana!*" Another woman came through with a bowl of liquid and a fist-full of leaves. The brute-woman started yelling at her. The leaf-woman stepped around the brute-woman, pushed her way through the crowd, sidestepped Steve and ducked into the hut.

"It's almost out!" Johnny said over the mother's moans as the top of the child's head burst through with a screech. Another woman ducked through the entrance. Johnny looked up and smiled at her. She nodded her head and twitched her lips as if to say, '*I acknowledge you.*'

"Johnny!" Steve didn't take his eyes off of the bare-chested

women. *They're friggin beautiful*, he thought. The closer they got to him the stronger the scent - like several cherry-colored magic markers under his nose. More came, but they didn't attempt to stick a pole up his rear and roast him in a fire. Yet.

"Hold on!" Johnny felt a rush of adrenaline in his head.

A boy, no older than 7, approached Steve with a curious look on his face. Steve stared back, wondering why the kid was the only male tribesman around. Then an older woman ran over and pulled the boy away by the arm, lecturing him.

Suddenly, four spears poked toward Steve's chin, forcing his back to the wall of the hut. One was the brute-woman. Another, head covered with a shawl, held her weapon with one hand because her arm was in a sling. The other two looked to be identical twins - young, thin faces, puffy lips and braided hair along the scalp.

"Johnny, they're getting hostile!"

The girl with the lei grabbed one of the twin sister's spears and tried pulling it away, yelling at everyone.

"It's a boy!" The baby cried as Johnny held it in his dirty hands. The child had a full head of black hair - more than he had seen on any newborn. *He's a heavy sucker, that's for sure*, he

thought.

The doctor held the umbilical cord and cut it with a knife, which had a wooden handle and a rusty steel blade.

Where'd she get that? Johnny wondered as he handed the child to her. She cradled him in her arm as she spilled a cup of liquid on its stomach and washed it with a large round leaf. Johnny knew a lot about leaves from books and years of camping, but never considered washing a newborn with one.

"Johnny! What the hell are you doing?" The women surrounding Steve continued pointing spears in his direction, but didn't seem certain if they should attack because the girl with the lei kept arguing.

When the doctor finished wiping the liquid, she placed the baby in the mother's arms, then curtsied to Johnny, who smiled in return. He grabbed his flashlight and crawled through the door, gasping for fresh air.

"*Good God,*" Johnny said as he saw the bare-chested women. The girl with the lei stepped around Johnny and entered the hut.

The brute-woman retracted her spear and walked up to Steve, standing face-to-face with him. She looked to be his size - 6 foot 2 and 190 pounds - and had a puffy lip with a spot of blood

on it. Her nose was grey and askew as if she had recently been punched. She pointed her gnawed fingernail between his eyes and moved it to the ground. Then she grabbed her throat and made a lifeless expression with her face, provoking laughter from the others.

"We gotta get out of here now," Steve said, but they were surrounded. "We might just have to kill..."

The brute-woman said something to her crew and their spears shot up, again pointing at Steve's chin, one at Johnny's.

"Shit," Steve said as he reached underneath the back of his shirt.

Suddenly, a woman hollered from behind them. It was the doctor, Johnny's only friend at the moment. She crawled out of the hut, yelling at the women with the spears. The petite girl with the lei followed, and then stood between the two men and the aggressive women as if trying to keep a fight from happening. The crew retracted their weapons as the brute-woman again got into a shouting match with the doctor.

"Run," Steve said quietly the moment the spears dropped. He and Johnny dodged the petite woman with the lei and bolted toward the exit, hearing commotion break out behind them.

"Retreat!" Johnny yelled, pumping his legs as fast as he could, gasping for breath.

The brute-woman tossed her spear toward them. Steve saw it flying and barely got out of the way as it slid through the exit.

"*Damn bitches!*" he screamed, feeling his buzz flipping the moment he left the village.

Torana and Valsa stood by the new mother's hut, while the others laughed and passed around the cannabis, celebrating the foreigner's flight.

Part II

1

No time in George Kraser's life seemed to go by faster than the previous two hours. It felt like only 15 minutes had passed between that very moment, in which he guided the GH-C4 aircraft eastbound 15,000 feet in the air, and earlier when a savage band of barbarians stepped into his life.

Navigating toward the darkened horizon, George knew all too well that the skull-crowned man hovered over him like a gargoye ready to bite off his head. He hadn't even directly seen his captor since he started the engine - just the left half of his twisted face reflecting off the glass in front of him.

For the first time since takeoff, George glanced at the radio headset. If only he had a moment of privacy, he'd turn it on, flip the switch and scream, *'Mayday! I've been hijacked! Get a SWAT team and don't hesitate to shoot em all!'*

What would the skull-crowned man do? What *could* he do? Kill him?

This guy can't touch me, or he dies.

Despite *knowing* that this island-dweller wouldn't slay the navigator in mid-flight, George couldn't bring himself to do anything other than steer. No grabbing for the headset, no calling for help, and no nose-diving the plane into the ocean and bringing an end to these people. Even those thoughts kicked his heartbeat into overdrive and sprouted a fresh round of goosebumps on his flesh. It was the very hope that he could get out of this alive that kept him going.

His eyes shot to the fuel gauge. Low. Then the signal started humming.

There should be plenty to get...

Lights ahead, stretching along the coast. He looked at the G.P.S. again but it still wasn't working.

Where to land...

Without the G.P.S. or air traffic controllers, he'd have to fly around looking for a safe place to land, and hope that another plane didn't cross his path.

Hell, I'm in a GH-C4, he thought. He could land just about anywhere. No need to cruise around looking for an airport. The nearest football field or parking lot would do just fine.

Then what?

Then they'd kill him.

Without thinking, George snatched the headset and screamed into the microphone, which wasn't even on. "*Help!*"

A spear swatted his hands, knocking the headset to the floor.

"*Oh God!*" Tears and spit flew from his face as he grabbed the yoke. The low-fuel signal continued humming as the plane crossed over the beach. There was a backup fuel tank, but all of a sudden he couldn't remember how to switch over to it. He shouldn't have had to, either, because the main tank held enough to get to and from the island with some to spare.

Someone tapped his shoulder. He turned. The skull-crowned tribesman slanted his hand toward the ground.

Land.

But he didn't see anywhere he could safely land. Not a field, a parking lot or even a freeway. *Where the hell am I?*

Losing altitude.

George released the wheels of the plane, downshifting toward nowhere in particular.

Further inland, more space. He pushed the throttle forward, speeding up the plane to 130 knots.

Then the emergency siren blared, replacing the hum of the low-fuel warning. The plane was going to land whether he found a safe strip or not.

Losing altitude.

Even in the dark he could make out the large residential rooftops and swimming pools. That meant there were streets, but not enough light to show a runway.

Five hundred feet.

As the plane descended, he could see the dim bulbs of street lamps, one on the corner of every block. He pulled back on the throttle, just enough so the nose of the plane didn't dip too low.

A few minutes later, the aircraft's wheels skidded along the concrete a couple of times before it sailed smoothly along the

ground. The wings hovered over the lawns on either side, above the mailboxes.

George leaned on the lower pedals and the plane squeaked to a stop, less than 50 yards after touching down. Then he cut off the motors and sat for a moment, staring at the road ahead.

No one came racing to the street to see what had happened. No SWAT team, no neighbors, no one to rescue him. George pressed a button and the rear ramp began lowering underneath the tribesmen. They jumped to their feet and moved to the back, then headed toward the exit before the ramp hit the ground.

A tap on the shoulder.

George turned to see his master's vulgar and twisted expression. The savage spoke and someone in the back stood and approached, also holding a spear.

Jesus Christ, my Lord, my God, please let me live. I beg for forgiveness of all my sins. If I die, please deliver me safely to the gates of Heaven...

The new guy stepped up with his lips curled. This made George feel even worse. It was bad enough that he had to spend the trip with a skull-crowned man hovering over his shoulder, but now he had to meet someone who looked even uglier. Probably the

leader's executioner.

...Please protect my family. Please help those trapped on the island. It was my poor judgment how they got there and why they were left there...

The tribesman's tanned, burley body wrapped with a loincloth made him look like a combination of a professional wrestler and Tarzan. George preferred the skull-wearer. Tarzan's eyes had a dull look to them.

...I love you my Lord, and I thank you for the life you have granted me... amen.

Tarzan grabbed George's wrist, then started pulling him along. But George didn't move as a clenching pain gripped his chest. He let out a gasp, looked up, lost his sight, and slumped to the ground.

2

Ithariche took his first glimpse of the Favored Land and shivered, feeling a lump in his throat and tears seep through his eyelids. This was it. His father had failed and he had made it, surviving the most improbable of all voyages to the very land where the creator roamed. It was nothing like he thought it would be, though. Incredibly large huts, smooth-stoned ground, posts of

light... so much to look at, but no time. There wasn't even time to dwell on the misfortune that the navigator had suddenly died and they had no way of steering the wings back to the island for the others.

This is what we have been denied. Now we shall take it.

The Tormentcaches walked down the rear of the shining wings and looked at the hut atop the hill. From there, Hraptor delivered his thunder and his lightning, his storms and his winds. There he made his decisions that would affect the lives of every single one of the creatures he created and eventually destroyed. At last he would meet his dejected beings.

The tribesmen charged up the hill carpeted with shortened grass, around the trees and bushes, staring in awe at the size of the grandest of all huts. Six white tree trunk-like posts lined the front, with grand double gates in the center. Fabric decorated the insides of the clear panes, four above the entrances and two more on either side. A triangular roof pointed to the sky with a statue and an arrow capping it off.

Ithariche stepped to the noble entrance. The others scattered to different areas until they surrounded the home. Some attempted to enter through the clear panes while others kept

guard, relaying progress by calling in the winged-beak code.

The leader of the Tormentcaches took a deep breath, balled his fist and knocked on the gate.

3

Bill Steinberg opened his eyes as he heard what sounded to be a truck rumbling through the neighborhood. Contemplating whether to look outside, he sat up, hoping the noise didn't wake Ellen or Jeremy.

A moment later, the banging began.

What the hell?

Rolling out of bed, Bill grabbed his silk robe from the floor and tied it on.

"What's that?" Ellen muttered with her head in the pillow.

"Nothing. Go back to sleep."

Bill walked into the security room - which was between his walk-in closet and bathroom - seeing movement on one of the six monitors. Out front, the silhouette of a man hit the door impatiently.

He had spent hundreds of dollars on this home security system, and he regretted it. The Hoover made him feel like an intruder in his own home because he couldn't move about freely

without shutting parts of it down. There was a separate alarm for each floor, including the basement. The codes were easy to remember: 1001, 1002 and 1003, but 1004 shut them all down at once.

It's a car accident. Gotta be a car accident.

Even if he accidentally set off the alarm, the company would call and ask for a password. Then the baby would wake. *Better not risk it*, he thought, pressing 1004. Then he grabbed his old-fashioned protection, a shotgun that he displayed like a trophy above his desk. He had it ever since the L.A. riots.

Bill loaded the ammo and stuffed a few more rounds into his robe. Chances were, the guy outside needed help, so he didn't want the alarm to get in the way. However, if it turned out to be a burglar, he'd be ready. It wasn't the same reasoning he would have used had it been daytime, but at 1 a.m., it made enough sense to follow through.

Though Jeremy normally woke him early in the morning and kept him up, Bill wanted to get back to sleep because he had a long day ahead of him. In the morning he'd meet with Jack Rachel, who he frequently worked with to redevelop urban land. Bill nicknamed Jack the 'Monopoly Man,' because he made a business out

of purchasing run-down homes from either the bank or the drug-addicted owners themselves, and turned it into something profitable. That evening, Bill would leave with his family to Maryland, where they would visit his parents and his brother for a week.

Bill plodded down the staircase, through the foyer. Suddenly his foot kicked something and his knee dropped and hit the floor. The gun slipped from his hands, bounced once off the tile and blasted the wall with a *crack!*

"*Fuck!*" he hissed.

By the dim light of the street lamp shining through the window, he could see a small hole in the wall. Ellen would never let him hear the end of that, and would lecture him until he got rid of that weapon.

Maybe the shot scared him away, he thought, picking up the gun.

"Bill?" Ellen's voice carried through the house from the bedroom.

"Everything's okay, go back to sleep!"

Bill hustled to the door, kicking aside the suitcase that had caused him to stumble. The key was already in the bolt-lock.

Before he opened it, he flipped on the outside light and looked out the window, but no one was there. He twisted the key to the left, hearing it click, then pulled open the door and aimed his weapon at the empty air.

An airplane was parked in the street.

"What the *hell*?" Bill stepped onto the porch, lowering the gun. The back ramp to the plane was opened but he didn't see anyone. Maybe whoever landed came running to the house for help. Bill glanced over to the Jacoby's place but no one was there. He looked to the other side of the street and didn't see anyone, either.

Bill stepped back inside and shut the door. That's when he heard glass shatter in the kitchen.

Oh God, he thought. His knees and hands were shaking as he pulled back the chamber and loaded another bullet.

Birds chirped from within the house.

Birds broke in?

As he spun around, the last thing he saw was the tip of a spear shoot toward his eye.

A chill tingled up Toriche's spine as he tugged his weapon

from Hraptor's face. It was an execution never thought to happen, and a final victory for his people. With a childish grin, he returned to the room where the others were entering through the broken square pane. He anxiously told them of his kill and showed them the blood dripping from his spear.

Madarain listened to Toriche's story as he helped another man climb through the entrance. '*Hraptor is not so easy to kill,*' he said.

'*Then who did I kill?*' Toriche asked.

'*A powerless pale man.*'

...

Lightning cracked inside. Ithariche dove into the bushes in front of the walkway, scraping his body on branches as he rolled underneath. In the corner of his eye he saw the gate open and someone poke out his head, probably looking at the shining wings at the bottom of the hill.

Is it Hraptor? Ithariche wondered, wishing he were in a position to pounce. He couldn't figure out why there was an explosion inside while everyone was still outside. Maybe it was a warning.

Hraptor shut the gate, but Ithariche didn't move. A moment

later, he heard someone call in the winged-beak voice. Something had gone right. Perhaps they had broken inside. Perhaps they had killed Hraptor. Perhaps Hraptor was preparing to kill them with lightning.

Not a sound. No lightning, no struggle.

The leader stood and brushed himself off. At the corner of the grand hut he saw a hand motioning for him. He ran to the side where he encountered a wood-striped barrier. One man's hands were gripping the top from the other side before letting go. Carefully, Ithariche grabbed the edge and swung his legs over, landing on a hard surface.

He ran around the corner, seeing a rectangular water hole with no connecting stream. A flat, wooden structure stood against the hut. Against the wall was a large rectangular pane with ivory strips of material hanging from within. Ithariche saw someone ducking through a square hole located near the larger pane, but not accessible on the wooden structure. After the man climbed through, Madarain stuck out his head and waved.

'Beware the shards.'

Madarain and Ithariche locked hands, and with the other Ithariche grabbed the bottom edge of the square opening and felt

a terrible slice. Pulling back, he saw blood seep in a straight line across the meaty part of his thumb.

'Beware the shards.'

Ithariche looked closer at the entrance and saw little sharp triangles along the edges. He took Madarain's hand again, grabbed the smoother part, pulled himself up, ducked through and stumbled inside.

Impressive, he thought while clutching his wound.

Broad grins lined their faces as they discovered the pale man's artifacts, even in the dark. They hopped from seat to seat, feeling the sturdy builds support their weight and soft cushions comfort their bottoms. They ran their hands across the flashy fabrics. Four large blades twirled slowly above their heads, centered by an unlit moon-like orb underneath and a yellow trimming on the side.

Madarain jiggled a handle above a small silver tub. Water came gushing in an even stream into a hole directly beneath. He called for Ithariche, who rushed over to wash the blood from his hand.

They make their own streams! Ithariche thought. Everyone took turns sticking their heads underneath the flowing water. He

looked out the broken pane, wondering if the water came from the large symmetrical pond out back. He figured that it captured rainwater and somehow pressured it up to the hut.

Ithariche opened the files that lined the walls, finding bowls and round platters. In a larger compartment he saw cylindrical containers with etchings of what looked to be beef strips and greens. He pulled one out, noticing that it was sealed all the way around with a silver lid. Placing it on the ground, he jammed his spear directly into its center and broke through.

'Meat,' he said, sniffing the contents. A few men gathered and he emptied the gooey brown strips into their hands. Much of it got stuck in the crease of the broken silver lid. He shook it around until more fell out.

Madarain ate some of the cold beef strips, knowing there had to be a better way of opening the container. Surely the pale man had a cleaner method, one that would remove the entire lid instead of crashing it into the contents.

In the corner of the chamber stood a white box that was the size of two men. Still chewing, Madarain yanked on the bottom handle. A gust of coolness hit him as he saw the shelves of food and bowls within. There was a half-empty container of plain white

liquid, just like breast milk. He pulled out an orange case, took a chug, and then passed it to the others. *'Squeezed fruit,'* he said. It tasted similar to what they made back home, but not nearly as fresh or juicy.

In three corners of another room, Ithariche found buckets of plants and soil. *Why do they bring bushes into the shelter?* he wondered, staring at each one for a moment. He never thought to drag a tree into his hut. The leaves were small and pointed. Surely these bushes had a purpose inside the hut.

'Release your wastes here,' he announced. The men rushed in and formed lines.

...

While the others explored the chamber of food and running water, Banca walked around the corner and down a short path. Lying on the ground was a dead pale man whom Toriche had killed, blood drying on his face.

Hraptor.

As Banca stared at the god's clotted eyes, he noticed silver twine and a dangling relic beneath the fur of his chin. He pulled it over the head, yanking out a few strands of brown hair that had gotten tangled.

Banca held each end of the sturdy necklace, looking at the inscribed emblem on the relic. Two intersecting triangles formed a six-pointed star. *This is the power of Hraptor*, he thought, shoving it into his satchel.

Then he saw the wood and metal stick lying by the exit.

A weapon.

Banca picked it up, running his fingers along the hole at the end, wondering why it was not sharp like a spear. A small arch hung from the bottom, just big enough for his finger to squeeze. Not wanting to generate it against himself, he set it down where he found it.

Then he saw a small, strange stone on the ground, no larger than the upper half of his smallest finger. Poking from the top was a dull silver stub. There was another along the wall, and another by a fallen burgundy box. He gathered all he could find - five total. One of them was missing the silver nub.

Then something else caught his attention. It was the only imperfection in the white wall - a small, round hole about knee-high from the ground.

He took one of the stubs and held it to the hole. It fit. Apparently, he thought, the stub was thrown like a rock with

incredible force.

Banca stood back, then pitched the stub. It bounced off the wall and landed on the square-stoned ground. He tried again, but all he could make was a dimple so small that he had to look closely to see it.

He stood there for a moment, scratching his head beneath his cap, looking at the hole. Then he looked back at the weapon.

He pushed the stub into the end of the long metal part at the end, but it slid around too easily. Then he saw the latch above the finger arch. He pointed the hole away from himself and slid it open. And there he found another stub, the silver part facing forward, the gold part in back.

He grinned.

...

The youngest of the group, Crediche, passed through the chamber with the potted bushes, breathing through his mouth so he wouldn't smell the urine and feces. What caught his eye were the orange fish swimming inside a clear, rectangular basin of water against the wall. Blue stones lined the bottom. He opened the top flap, stuck his hand in the water and grabbed for the fish. There was a small net nearby, but he left it alone, going for the kill

himself. In the salty water back home, the men considered it honorable to catch fish with their bare hands. They used spears, bait or nets only when they ran out of patience. He closed his fist around the largest of the slimy, bright-orange swimmers, and stuck it in his mouth. The fish slithered down his throat, flopping around as it went to his stomach. He burped.

'Crediche?' His father, Toriche, came walking in. *'What are you doing?'*

'Eating,' he said.

'You fool! Those fish are not for eating!'

'Why not?'

'They are too small. They will make you sick.'

'But I am hungry!'

Toriche swatted Crediche on the back of the head. *'Go sit, and do not touch anything.'*

...

As the Tormentcaches settled on the soft benches and the fuzzy ground, Ithariche continued exploring the chamber of food and running water. Inside one of several retractable compartments, he found a bunch of hand-held tools, some with long, sharp edges and a tip, others with four tips but no blade,

and several dull scoops. He pulled out seven sharp blades and set them on the waist-high surface. *Weapons*, he thought, feeling the tips with his finger, making sure not to carelessly cut himself again. Some of the blades were too dull and others had no tip so he put them away.

'Ithariche, come,' Toriche said, walking in from the chamber where several men were resting.

Toriche led Ithariche around the corner. The pale man was flattened on the square, smooth-stoned ground in a puddle of his own drying blood.

'Why did you not show him to me sooner?' Ithariche asked.

Toriche shrugged. *'Madarain said he is just another pale man.'*

Ithariche stood over the dead man, staring down on him. There was a tale that Hraptor had a human form and lived amongst those in the Favored Land. Naturally, the one who creates something so wonderful would want to be a part of it.

'Is this Hraptor?' Toriche asked as Ithariche stared at the bloodied face.

'His body is gone but his spirit lives. You murdered the mortal Hraptor. Very good. Sleep now.'

Toriche nodded and went looking for his son, leaving Ithariche alone with the dead mortal Hraptor.

The god was tall, pale, with long brown hair from the head and the chin. He wore a blue-knotted cloth, far slicker than the itchy fabric that Ithariche draped over his body when it rained. He untied the knot and flipped Hraptor onto his front, careful to keep more blood from seeping onto the material. Then he bent Hraptor's arms backward and pulled off the cloth, holding it before him for examination. A few drops of blood stained the collar.

Ithariche hurried to the chamber of food and running water. He soaked the cloth in the stream, washing away the blood as he did his own into the dark hole. Though the fabric was wet, he slipped it on, one arm at a time. He could feel his shoulders tug uncomfortably on either side as he knotted the belt around his waist.

While walking back to the chamber of Hraptor's death, he came across a closed gate. He tugged on the golden knob, but it didn't budge. He turned it, then easily pushed it open. There he saw a declining pathway to an underground chamber.

A moment later, he pushed down Hraptor's body as if he were

shoving a log down a hill. It rolled and clunked in several positions until it settled at the bottom. Hraptor's legs pointed up, twisting like roots, and one of his arms bent backward behind his head. Spots of blood led down the fuzzy angled ground.

He shut the gate, found a spot on the floor, and went to sleep.

...

Needing a secure place to hide his newly discovered weapon, Banca walked to the upper level, momentarily eyeing realistic etchings of nature and hilly regions framed along the wall. At the top, he came upon a passage of closed gates that were far more secure than the cloth doors back home. *Maybe each one leads to another world*, he thought. He turned one of the golden knobs and pulled it open.

The white room was small and odd - certainly not a place where people slept. Red cloths hung over a silver bar, right across from a sturdy seat that was connected to the floor. A transparent curtain covered part of the room. On it was a silhouette in the shape of a person grasping a spike. Etched in thick red print were symbols: "*Bates Motel*."

The table had a rounded crevice with a circular gutter at

the bottom, much like the one in the chamber of food and running water. Above it, flat against the wall, Banca saw his own image on the reflecting square, mocking all his movements.

He shivered.

Only in steady water had he thought a reflection could appear, but this was infinitely clearer. He saw the fur covering his scarred head where hair no longer grew - scars that his father had battered into him when he was a child. He saw his face, the rugged skin, the askew right cheekbone, and the flaring nostrils.

Then there were the eyes. Reddish squiggly lines ran through the white egg-shaped background. Orbs made up of brown segments circled the black holes in the middle. They seemed to be growing larger, then retracting, like pulsating chasms. Tears began forming in the creases, but none fell. Few had ever fallen - even when he was a child, despite his father's beatings. These were the eyes that Anesa had to stare into as he broke her ribs and forced her to embrace, while the others danced at the feast of the full moon. These were the eyes that she sacrificed her life to avoid when she stabbed herself in the most intimate of places, dying only a day before the ceremony that would make them

permanent mates. More than ten revolutions had passed, yet it wasn't until he saw into these eyes did he realize why she did it.

Yet, he couldn't bear to turn his head from this hypnotic image. He kept staring, remembering when he first saw the young pale girl step off the shining wings. She was even more beautiful than Anesa - beauty that could have only come straight from Hraptor's heavens. As the pale intruders settled, Ithariche called everyone back to the village. Then the leader foolishly insisted that they proceed with the feast of the full moon as if nothing out of the ordinary was going on. The celebration didn't last very long - Banca was first to see the pale boy attempt to burn the outskirts of the village so they'd all be trapped in the ring of fire, just as the age-old prophecy said. While Ithariche, Toriche and Madarain stayed behind, no doubt reassessing the situation, Banca led the charge and killed the destroyer, thus saving everyone for the time being. While Ithariche conjured a plan to seize the shining wings and leave behind their helpless women to deal with the remaining pale destroyers, Banca dragged the beautiful pale girl into the forest, holding his hand over her mouth and watching the fear in her eyes - the same fear he

had seen before.

These reflections can be our downfall, he thought, straining to turn away.

Banca stepped out of the small chamber, shaking his head, hoping to rid the memory of that awful experience. With his back propped against the wall, he slid down, sniffing and holding in the tears as he drifted off to sleep.

...

The weapon had fallen by Banca's side. When he woke, he realized how lucky he was that someone didn't come up and find it with him. Standing and grabbing it by the wooden end, he walked to another chamber, looking for a place to hide it.

Inside, a pale woman slept beneath covers on a large rectangular surface. She had curly hair - the color of the sun.

Slowly, he approached, raising the metal and wooden weapon over his head, over her body, ready to slam it down, ready to mate again.

Suddenly, a loud repetitious noise blared from a box on a nearby table. Banca ran into a connecting chamber and hid, clenching his weapon against his chest, seeing several square screens with images of the outside world.

Driving through the mountains in a red Grand Cherokee, the baby in the seat next to her without a seat belt... a deer jumps... she stomps the brake pedal... the car screeches to a halt... knocks the deer across the road... blood skidding the asphalt... the baby smashes through the windshield... beads of glass shatter everywhere... she reaches through the glass... retrieves her son... thanking God he is unharmed... the deer lays splattered on the ground in a pool of blood... the police siren gets louder...

Ellen Steinberg opened her eyes, realizing that the police siren was Bill's alarm clock. It wasn't the first time it woke her up at 6 a.m., and it was the third time in the past eight hours her sleep was interrupted. Ironically, not once was it because of Jeremy, who had woken her four times the time before.

She reached across the bed and hit snooze, wondering where her husband had gone. He wasn't in the bathroom - the door was opened and the light was off.

Then she could hear Jeremy crying from down the hall. Ellen tossed the comforter onto the floor, sprang up and hurried to the nursery.

She gently lifted her child and cuddled him, smelling the dirty diapers as she pulled down the strap of her nightgown and put his mouth to her breast.

The door slammed shut behind her.

"Bill?" She walked over to the door, hearing deep voices right outside. "Who's there?"

The baby cried again as she pulled his mouth away from her bosom.

The voices stopped but she could sense that they were still outside the door.

Am I dreaming?

Her heartbeat quickened.

"Who's there!" she yelled over her child's cries.

Should I open the door?

Her body trembled as she pushed her child's head back to her breast and fell back into the rocking chair.

"Who's there?" Tears rolled down her reddening face, spilling onto her child's head as he screamed as if he knew something was wrong.

Ithariche woke as the nearest star brightened the borders of

the fabric hanging over the clear panes. His thumb continued to throb, as if a disease had crept into the incision and into his bloodstream. He got up from his resting spot and walked into the water chamber, holding his hand underneath the flowing spring.

Next to the tub, a series of white connecting cloths curled around a hollow tube. He tore one off and wrapped it around his hand.

Damn those shards, he thought, wondering why he was the only one who had gotten injured while climbing through the opening.

Clutching the cloth around his thumb, Ithariche stepped back to the sleeping room, looking over his men. They were resting side-by-side. Some snored, some tossed and turned, while others remained still.

It suddenly occurred to him that he hadn't seen Banca in a while. He walked to another room where a few others had found soft places to rest, but the captain wasn't there, either.

Ithariche followed the bloodstains to the room where Toriche had struck down the pale man, *Hraptor*.

He stepped onto the angled pathway, eyeing the realistic etchings that hung on the walls. He poked at one, feeling the smooth square protector. Using his middle knuckle, he jabbed the

pane and it cracked into a star pattern. Another spot of blood trickled down his finger.

The shards! he thought, just as a woman's screamed from the upper level.

Ithariche dashed up the path to see Banca standing by a closed gate.

'Come here!' Ithariche grabbed his arm and pulled him into the angled pathway. 'What are you doing?'

'I searched the upper level and found a pale woman sleeping. Then a child began crying and she ran to its chamber. I closed the gate so she would not escape.'

Ithariche paused for a moment. 'No one shall harm them,' he said, pointing. 'You are in charge of keeping the others away.'

'Why would a woman not sleep with her child by her side?' Banca asked.

'I do not understand, either.' Ithariche wiped the blood from his knuckle onto the white cloth that he already had wrapped around his thumb.

'Come, I must show you something.' Banca turned and led Ithariche down the upper level's pathway. 'You now wear the pale man's cloth?'

'The mortal Hraptor's cloth,' Ithariche said as Banca guided him into a small chamber.

Ithariche didn't even look at the contents of the room. As soon as he saw the reflector, his eyes locked onto it.

'Leave me be,' the leader said as he drew closer. He stood still, unblinking, concentrating so hard that the world around him vanished. Such a wall could only exist in the Favored Land, the land he long yearned for, the land his father had yearned for. Deeper and deeper he looked, thinking...

Never before had the Tormentcaches escaped their gold-sanded shores, only once did they try. Ithariche's father, Retariche, became obsessed with departing the sultry prison, but refused to use the pale men's crafts that had floated to their shores. Instead, he spent an entire revolution building a raft, then sent out three of his commanders to find passage to the Favored Land.

When the nearest star rose, the raft had washed back to their shores, empty, the council gone forever.

After Retariche died, another foreigner's vessel found their island. Ithariche, still young and learning the ways of leadership, pleaded with Toriche not to capsize the boat and push it back into the salty water. But Toriche insisted that is what

Retariche would have wanted, so he did.

Nearly 15 revolutions later, the opportunity for escape presented itself again as the shining wings glided toward their shores.

Who came out of it? Not the destroyer like that bogus prophecy claimed, but pale children, laughing, smiling, and not the least bit hostile.

Then a couple of thoughts suddenly struck him - thoughts he had been aggressively suppressing since they landed and since the navigator fell to his death. Not until he looked into his own eyes could he put these thoughts on the forefront of his mind.

Who will guide us back to retrieve the others? How long can we stay in this grand hut until the final battle occurs?

In the skull that rested on top of his head, Ithariche saw in the reflector: Retariche's eyes staring down, flashing an ominous grin before sinking his decaying teeth into his son's head.

You've already failed.

Ithariche screamed, breaking the locked pupils on his very image.

He smashed the reflection, all its truth, all with a swing

of his fist. Cracks split outward in a star with a drop of blood dripping down the center. He kicked open the gate, leaving a large splintering hole in the white wood.

Banca stood outside, arms folded, staring blankly.

Ithariche ran down the pathway, Hraptor's robe flapping behind his legs, blood dripping from his two big knuckles. The white cloth had fallen off of his thumb.

With two leaps he landed at the bottom of the angled walkway, then entered the water room to grab his spear. His weary-eyed tribe had awakened, watching him crash through every gate, finding more reflectors of truth. Each time, he plunged forth his weapon, shattering the wall into thousands of shards.

The tribe stood silently and watched. This was their leader, a madman on a rampage for reasons withheld. Barriers crashed open as their warlord in Hraptor's cloth stalked the square reflectors, shattering them with such pressure that it could have been the destroyer himself.

He ran back up the angled pathway and found a couple more reflectors in various chambers, dropping his spear and using only his fists, creating thousands of shards with each bashing jab.

A buzzing sound came from one of the larger chambers. He ran

in, seeing that a small box was making the racket. Jumping onto the padded surface, he grabbed the box, which was connecting to the wall with some sort of rope. He tugged on it, instantly stopping the noise, and then hurled the box across the room.

Attached to the same room was another small chamber with a reflector. Ithariche ran in, eyeing himself one final time as he hurled his fist forward, shattering the reflection into thousands of jagged pieces.

He drew back his shaking hand, staring at the blood, opened his mouth as if to scream, and stumbled to the ground.

Madarain and Toriche saw his head sticking out of the chamber, facing up, eyes shut. They rushed to him, checking for injuries. Toriche knew Ithariche was alive because his heartbeat still thumped... so loudly, in fact, that they could hear it without placing their ear to his chest. The leader breathed as if he were trying to blow out a fire. His skull crown fell off, showing scars along the hairless surface.

...

It was the first full moon feast of the new revolution. As the Tormentcaches danced around the fire and smoked cannabis, Honta - Ithariche's mother and Retariche's mate - slipped away.

She turned her head nervously as she hurried to Moriche's hut. Ithariche, then nine, noticed this, and followed her as she ducked through the entrance.

Moriche was different than the other men. His mother and father were also brother and sister. Kitcharain was put to death on the stake for forcibly embracing his kin. Pattama, the mother, insisted that the child was that of her permanent mate's - but no one else - other than her mate - believed this. Moriche functioned slower than the others, but well enough to sort firewood and other menial tasks. Rarely did he participate in the festivities - no one wanted him there.

Retariche spotted his son standing by Moriche's hut, then walked to him from the bonfire. He grabbed Ithariche's hand and began leading him away when he heard a deep, prolonged groan from within. The inbred often made strange, random noises, but this was louder.

Though Retariche had no intention of investigating, Ithariche grabbed his father's arm and tried yanking him away, pleading for him to leave Moriche alone. That's when Retariche paused, turned and reached for the cloth entrance.

Ithariche screamed, clutched his father's wrist and pulled

with all his strength. Retariche bent his elbow and shot it out, knocking his son backward to the ground. As Retariche reached for the cloth again, Ithariche got up, charged and jumped on his back, wrapping his hands around the leader's neck while crying.

Retariche pulled his son off his back, clenched the boy's throat and pulled him close as if ready to kiss him. Ithariche struggled to breathe for a moment before his father released his neck and grabbed hold of his bangs by the roots, snapping back his head and lifting him off the heels of his feet.

Then Ithariche felt a horrible slicing pain along his hairline. A muffled scream followed, as blood poured down his forehead over his face. Before the blood dripped into his eyes, Ithariche could see his father toss aside the patch of hair while sheathing his blade.

Honta poked her head from the side of the cloth entrance. The fire reflected on her face, and Retariche knew it was she by the design of the boar's blood he had etched. His foot crashed into her, breaking her nose and puffing her lip like fungus. Then he dove through the entrance.

A moment later, Retariche emerged from the hut - stepping backward - pulling a nude Moriche by the ankles. The inbred was

flopping around and screaming.

The music and dancing stopped as Retariche stomped his heel between Moriche's legs several times, making him howl as he balled up into the fetal position. Retariche grabbed two fist-fulls of Moriche's hair and resumed dragging him to the center of the village.

His blade still wet with Ithariche's blood, Retariche knelt, slicing the skin around Moriche's forehead, yanking the hair and tossing it aside. The screams stopped as their leader repeatedly dropped his fist onto the inbred's skull, cracking it like an egg. He pulled off pieces of bone, then tugged on the ruffled head organ, ripping off a chunk and holding it high. 'I eat the man who rapes my mate!'

In the firelight, they saw Retariche open his mouth, lowering the clump, sucking it in. With a hefty jaw, their undisputed leader bit down, tearing it with his hand and his clenched teeth.

Retariche stumbled to his feet, trying to suck in air. His face twitched and turned, his eyes widened and he banged on his stomach. A moment later, his legs collapsed and he flattened to the ground. His leg wriggled for a moment, then stopped.

The tribe gathered around to watch their warlord, lying there breathless, eyes wide open.

This was their ruler, a man who led with a fist of stone and a heart of ice... a man who challenged Hraptor with the lives of three chief tribesmen, who brutalized his permanent mate which led to her infidelity, which led to both his and her lover's death.

As the healer rushed to Ithariche's aid, Madarain and Toriche disposed of Retariche's body in the forest.

Three days later, when Ithariche could stand and walk again, he insisted on seeing his father. Toriche took him to that part of the woods and left him alone.

That night, Ithariche returned to the village, wearing the face-plate of Retariche's skull on his head, strapped around his chin.

Less than a revolution later, Honta gave birth to Basariche. She died soon afterward, Retariche's spirit dragging her to the mysterious afterlife with him.

...

Madarain and Toriche ducked out of the chamber the moment they saw Ithariche's eyes flutter open. The leader sat up and

grunted, picking up the skull-crown that had slipped off of his head. He held it in front of him. The teeth long since eroded, the skull's empty eyes stared into his. It was his father, Retariche.

Ithariche hurled the skull across the room. It smacked the wall and shattered into four pieces, splitting each side of the eyes and cheeks. He walked to it and lifted his foot over one of the pieces. A dulled *crunch* followed as the bones scattered like broken pottery. He did the same to the other pieces, then swept the fragments together with his feet until they were piled tidily in the corner.

A stream of urine poured over the bones.

Madarain glanced inside, seeing Ithariche facing the corner, his hand reaching underneath Hraptor's fabric which he now wore as his own. The captain turned away, gagging.

The leader shook off, lifted his head and took a deep breath. The tribe was flirting with extinction, possibly in the holiest and bloodiest of any war, and Retariche's spirit - or remnants of his body - was the last thing Ithariche needed. He stared at the shattered skull, soaked with his own waste, and spit on it.

Ithariche turned and went back inside the small chamber, seeing the cracked reflections of himself in the shards that clung to the wall. With those magic reflectors, Hraptor attempted to make the warriors feel so awful that they couldn't bear to live another moment. Then they'd terminate themselves, just as an occasional woman did back home. Even Ithariche admired the complexity of Hraptor's plan, so different than any of the other plagues he unleashed upon them.

'Ithariche, come.' Banca poked his head inside, and Ithariche followed. The captain led him into another chamber, pointing out the square boxes that showed the outside world. Six screens were lined in separate compartments along the wall, each eyeing different angles of the outside world.

On one screen they saw the wings, swarmed with people and massive wheeled carts.

Ithariche's eyes widened, his throat lumped, his bloodied fists clenched and his heart started stammering again. It was one attack after another. Hraptor wouldn't quit.

The leader went to the square clear pane, moving the fabric to see with his own eyes. Two men, one pale and one of a darker color, hiked toward the front of the grand hut. Another man,

standing by a wheeled cart, saw him, eye to eye for the smallest part of a moment.

They have found us! Ithariche thought as he raced to the main level.

On the screen, Banca saw the pale man's finger touch a spot beside the entrance. A two-noted tone rang throughout the hut.

Ithariche found the rest of his men just as the chime sounded. The startled troops grabbed for their spears as Ithariche lifted his arm to keep them still.

A moment later, Banca saw the two men walk away from the hut, headed off the screen.

Ithariche and his men stood still and quiet, shaking nervously.

7

"Jack? It's Leonard." Sgt. McCoy stepped inside the police boundaries away from the crowd and press. "Got some bad news. A really good source of mine just told me that you hired Pilot George Kraser from Adventure Flights."

"Yeah," Jack Rachel said, yawning. He sat on his bed in his Bel-Air home.

"Well, his plane landed in the middle of the street here in

Tanglewood. The pilot is dead, and we're sure it's Kraser."

"You're *shitting* me," Jack said, hurrying to his desk to look for a list of phone numbers.

"Nope." McCoy changed ears with the phone, glancing up to make sure no one was close enough to hear him.

"Listen, don't tell anyone anything until I say." Jack scanned down the names and numbers of his assistants in Los Angeles who helped set up the camp.

"They'll find out for themselves, but I'll keep my mouth shut for now."

"Okay," Jack said. "*Damn it!*"

"Gotta go." McCoy pressed END on his cell phone as he approached two officers.

"We questioned everyone out here," one of them said. Several neighbors stood outside the yellow ribbons, which were tied to mailboxes and police cruisers. "No one saw anything."

"Start going house to house," McCoy said. The two officers turned and headed up the nearest driveway. He glanced at the house. A drape shifted on the top floor window. He squinted, looking closer, but saw nothing.

"Sgt. McCoy, whose plane is this?" A journalist asked from

beyond the yellow ribbon.

"I told you, I'm not answering questions yet," he said, turning back to the plane as the emergency crew wheeled George Kraser into an ambulance.

8

The sounds that she heard... so close, so dangerous, noises that would have sent Jeremy into hysterics had he been older. Noises that would have sent her into hysterics had she not had to stay calm around the baby. All morning, Ellen could faintly hear foreigners speaking an unrecognizable language. Later came the sounds of shattering glass, as if someone were running around breaking windows.

These strange sounds made everything worse. Had the kidnappers, or whoever they were, been mellow, organized individuals with a plan, she wouldn't have been left to guess what was going on. As far as she knew, alien psychopaths had taken control of her house and had no intention of leaving.

Jeremy was awake, hanging over her shoulder and facing the back of the rocking chair. He made the occasional *gurgle* noise, but that was it. He had finished feeding, and was happy and comfortable in his mother's arms.

Suddenly, she heard a siren blaring outside.

Rescue.

It didn't last long, as if it only had a block or two to travel. She couldn't think why a fire engine, an ambulance or a police car would turn its siren on for only ten seconds in a suburban neighborhood. Maybe the officer was doing it to impress the kids.

But that couldn't have been the case because there was a clear crisis going on in the Steinberg household. Those sirens should have been blaring, followed by a negotiator's voice coming out of a megaphone. The phone should have been ringing and the kidnappers should have been demanding a ransom. At least, that's the way it happened in the movies.

After the siren had turned off, all she could barely hear was the *beep beep beep* of a truck backing up, and the occasional rev of an engine.

Why didn't I put the nursery in a room with a window? she asked herself. Bill wanted his office to have the window, leaving the baby's room without one. It was the only room in the house - except for the bathrooms, closets, laundry room and storage room in the basement - that didn't have a window.

Another five minutes passed. Though each sound was faint, it was clearly busier than usual outside.

Then she heard a noise, one louder than all of the others, that was very familiar. It was the doorbell.

9

The tone rang in their heads, that strange *ding dong* noise. Surely that wasn't the call to war. Was it the pale man's music? *Ding dong*? Of all the miraculous things they had, those soft, fuzzy floors, large chambers, upper levels and so much else, their music was *ding dong*?

Banca interrupted their thoughts as he entered the chamber.

'They retreated,' he said calmly.

'How do you know?' several men asked.

'I saw on the mystical screens.'

The Tores broke into discussion.

Ithariche held up his hand, silencing the room at once. He stood at the end of the chamber, facing everyone, staring with eyes so wide that each man thought he was looking directly at him. When Ithariche spoke, all heard, even when they doubted his methods and questioned his tantrums.

'The pale men have fled, but be warned: They shall return in

greater numbers.'

The muttering resumed, but Ithariche shot out his arm and squeezed his fist.

'Remember why we are here. We have beaten the prophecy of destruction. The shining wings were destined to deliver the destroyer, the one who would send us scurrying from our burning huts to our bloody deaths. Hraptor's pale children are powerless, and our women are safe. With our invasion of the Favored Land, we have taken the very spear from Hraptor's hand and turned it against him. Soon, the pale men will return for one final battle. We will fight and slay these spoiled people! We will defeat Hraptor! Then we shall send for our women and children, and bring them back to this miraculous land!'

It took a moment for it to sink in, but slowly a renewed sense of hope gleamed in their eyes. Ithariche was relieved that the speech was all it took to regain their confidence, however temporary.

...

Ithariche left the chamber, motioning for Madarain to follow. They met in the room of Hraptor's death.

'The upper chambers are forbidden to all but the captains,'

the leader said.

Madarain nodded, then Ithariche left him and returned to the mystical visions.

The moment he entered the room, his heart took another dive as he saw large wheeled carts dragging away the shining wings. He held his breath, holding in a scream, then exhaled slowly.

The Tormentcaches had survived Hraptor's twirling storms, crashing waves, intruders and prophecies, but Ithariche knew that his mistakes could cost them in the end. From that point, mostly luck would lead them to their ultimate goal. If the pale men had another navigator, they would have to return for their children. Then the remaining Tores, whether they killed the young intruders or not, would have to seize that set of wings and fly to the Favored Land. Meanwhile, the men would have to conquer once and for all Hraptor's army in foreign territory, a disadvantage the Tormentcaches never knew.

Ithariche regretted dividing the sexes, leaving behind only a few males but bringing with him no females for breeding. The wings simply weren't big enough to hold everyone. He had every intention of dropping off the men at this grand hut and returning with the navigator back to the island to pick up the others.

Why did the navigator have to die? Ithariche thought to himself, so frustrated that he wanted to bang his head against the ground. Had that man not died, he could have done exactly what he had planned. At the very least, he should have guarded the shining wings, which was no longer visible on the mystical screens.

Perhaps his men were sensing these mistakes. Perhaps they would lose faith and turn against him. Throughout the revolutions there were periodic threats of takeover, usually ending with a spear shoved through the traitor's stump. Toriche and Madarain were ever capable of turning against him, and even succeeding if they made the right moves.

Madarain was no fool. He wouldn't attempt to overthrow Ithariche while they were on the verge of war. Also, Madarain hadn't the strength to do it himself. He would need Toriche, who hung on his every word. The two captains took control of the tribe after Retariche died and while Ithariche matured. Toriche always enforced Madarain's orders, which weren't more controversial than deciding where to build a new hut or approving a man's choice of a permanent mate. However, Madarain's constant criticism of Tore traditions remained unpopular. He wanted to

give women the right to decline a permanent mate, and prosecute men who forced them to embrace. Not even Toriche went along with him on that.

If another one of Ithariche's plans failed, Banca was the most likely one to cause trouble. When Banca disagreed with anyone, he would often turn to others and voice his disgust, which probably happened more often than the leader knew. He wished to slaughter the pale children the moment they arrived. Ithariche refused, because the navigator likely guided the wings back to the Favored Land only to keep the Tore men from killing his people. Otherwise, the navigator would have had every reason to steer the wings into the salty water, killing them all.

Even then, with the sexes divided and the shining wings out of their hands, they still had the opportunity to defeat Hraptor and his army. But only if they remained together.

Toriche, Madarain, Banca and all of the others were smart enough to know that a coup wouldn't solve their problems. Hraptor cared not who led the Tores. If they had anything in common, it was the hatred of the evil creator and destroyer. No tribesman would betray his people by siding with the pale man's savior. Every Tore felt Hraptor's wrath as the evil god quarantined his

own creation on an elevated remnant of land in the salty waters. There they were meant to stay until the nearest star exploded and ended all life on the Great Sphere.

When that finally happened, Ithariche thought, Hraptor would start anew on another orb by another star. He'd create life from scratch again. He'd make new prophecies, new followers, new enemies, and watch new episodes of mortal drama unfold. He'd even join them as he had on the Great Sphere. It was even possible that Hraptor scripted everyone's actions, thoughts and dialogue while letting them believe that they had free will. If that were so, then the Tormentcaches' destiny had already been determined. Maybe Hraptor would let them win in the end, a reward for their perseverance. Not likely, Ithariche thought, but nor was it likely that the tribe would find passage to the Favored Land. This was Hraptor's game, but their lives, and the creator would receive no justice for his misdeeds.

Trying to concern himself with such eternal mysteries proved to be overwhelming. Hraptor could run the world any way he wanted, and there was nothing Ithariche could do about it but continue fighting for freedom - if it existed at all. With or without the women, he was closer than even his father had

dreamed.

Madarain stepped to Ithariche's side, interrupting his thoughts as he glared at the multiple screens. The captain said some of the men were feeling sick, including himself. Ithariche told the captain to rest, and perhaps he would feel better the following day.

It is the new land, filled with diseases and plagues, another of Hraptor's attempts to finally put an end to us, he thought.

Nevertheless, Ithariche hadn't anything for them to do. They couldn't leave the hut because someone might see them. All they could do was wait for the pale man to finally realize that something was wrong in Hraptor's hut, and then the final battle would begin.

...

Crediche couldn't figure out why anyone would need so many different types of containers. Searching through the pull-out compartments in the water room, he found clear pouches with lines sealed together at the opening, brown folded bags in two different sizes, and a stash of thin stretchable sacks used for lining a box filled with waste. He also found both clear and

metallic wrapping material that rolled out of boxes with jagged blades.

Then he went to another chamber and searched through more compartments and shelves. Atop a wooden shelf, he found a line of sturdy rectangular covers that wrapped around hundreds of thin, stacked parchment. He pulled out the thickest one he could find. Etched on the cover were the symbols: THE TANAKH. Within, thousands of smaller symbols were lined evenly across the white scrolls. He couldn't fathom how someone would have the patience to interpret so many characters.

To the right of these square pages atop the shelf, he found a black gadget, twice the size of his hand. He looked through the little clear square in the upper right-hand corner, seeing the sky-colored wall on the other side of the room. He pressed the fingernail-sized square on the top right side and a flash of light burst from the opposite end. Startled, he put the gadget back on the shelf, hearing a prolonged buzzing noise as a flimsy square scrolled out of a slot. He looked at it, but there was nothing.

There was something. It slowly faded into to view. A moment later, it revealed a realistic etching of the very wall in front

of him, the same thing that he saw through the clear square. The gadget was like an eye, transcribing an image by forcibly pressing the square that triggered a blinding flash of light. At last, he had found something useful.

...

Walking through the passages on the main level, Toriche's thoughts wandered back to the island, to his daughter Valsa. He hoped that she and Ithariche would make children as soon as they were reunited, and it was a mystery why they hadn't already. Most women had their first child between 13 and 15 revolutions. Valsa was 16.

At the same time, Toriche had doubts about ever seeing her again. Ithariche had yet to tell them how the women would arrive to the Favored Land. Perhaps they would be separated forever. Perhaps the pale man would kill them, and Ithariche would fail in a much worse way than his father had.

No, Toriche thought. Ithariche, even in the pale man's silly robe, even with his tantrums, had far more strength than Retariche. The former leader was a deviant monster aching to migrate, and died disgracefully. Ithariche was different. He had already succeeded in leading them to the Favored Land, and he

would succeed in getting the women and children there, too.

Toriche's sense of smell interrupted his thoughts. The faint scent of burnt grass lingered nearby. It wasn't smoke, but the permanent aroma that it leaves behind in places where it frequently hovers, like inside his hut. He took a second sniff to verify, then found himself in front of a closed gate. There was a round golden relic on the right side, shaped like a mushroom.

He poked at the relic for a moment. Then, standing with his right leg forward, he smashed his left foot through the center of the gate, splintering the wood with his bare heel. He pulled it out, stepped back, and kicked again below the first hole, then again. The golden mushroom fell through the opposite end as he smashed around the edges, sending shreds of wood flying.

Finally, the hole was big enough for him to squeeze through. Turning sideways, he put one foot on the other side and slid in, feeling the jagged edges of the wood scrape his front and back. A thin line of blood trickled down his chest, but it was nothing that wouldn't eventually heal on its own. His permanent mate, Torana, who sometimes told him more about healing than he cared to know, said that the curing power of the round leaves was a myth and caused more harm than good. At first, Toriche did not

believe her because everyone else continued to use them. She insisted that they did so out of habit and tradition, and she had no interest in changing that in fear of being stripped of her healing duties. So, Toriche refused to use the round leaves, and opted to let his scrapes and gashes heal on their own, no matter how painful the wound.

Inside the chamber, black fabric hung from the wall with a large green leaf in the center. Resting in the corner was a wooden mask with a painted face, grass streaming out of the ends like hair. Some of the men made their permanent mates wear similar masks while embracing. These women were not pleasant to look at. Toriche picked it up and stuck it by the gate, saving it as a gift for Madarain. Ithariche certainly wouldn't need it for Valsa, but Toriche wished Madarain's mate, Veema, would wear it all of the time.

Then Toriche opened a few of the sliding compartments, pulling stuff out and tossing it across the room. Behind a stack of small rectangular etchings, he found a clear pouch of dry curly grass knotted together with yellow twine.

Cannabis.

With a broad grin, he stuck it in his satchel and left the

chamber the same way he entered, leaving the mask behind.

...

While some men didn't look twice at an unfamiliar object, Crediche continued playing with every gadget he could find. Securing the strap of his image-printing device around his shoulder, he returned to the chamber where several men were resting on long seats and the fuzzy ground. He had purposely avoided that area so he wouldn't disturb his elders, but he wanted so badly to examine the large square box in the corner. His father wouldn't allow him to go to the upper level, nor the lowest one, so that was the only available room that he hadn't yet explored. He walked in, hoping to at least play with the box for a moment before putting up with the predictable lecture.

The box's shiny skin reflected his image like dark, steady water. Among other things, a hand-sized rectangular object rested on top. It had several blue dots ordered four to a row, and one red dot in the upper right-hand corner. Surely, that one would be the most powerful. He pressed it with his thumb.

A colorful vision burst onto the screen, and sound abruptly blasted from all sides of the chamber. The men sprang from their resting spots as a foreign voice projected from all sides of the

room. They grabbed for their spears as they saw on the box a moving illustration of the shining wings and a pale man standing beside it. Then, as if the box had another set of eyes, it switched to a scene of the dead navigator being pulled out.

The men slowly put down their spears and crouched, gawking at the shrunken views within the mystical box.

'This is a portal from outside! The enemy will enter from here!' Basariche said. He shot up his arms and hands, charging, hitting the screen on either side and knocking it off of its stand. Now on the ground, the picture turned into grey static, and the foreign voices vanished.

'You fool!' several men yelled - Crediche included - as the man with the inbred father ran out of the room, just as he always did when they began cursing him.

...

There were men in every chamber, so Basariche entered the smallest one on that level, which contained a shattered reflector and white seat. He closed the gate and flipped the switch on the wall. An orb of light brightened above. They had found other such switches throughout the dwelling. At first, they kept flipping them, watching the light brighten and dim, like day and night.

That game became boring after awhile, so they left them in the brighter position.

Having been gone for less than a day, Basariche already missed the island, especially his secret spot by the waterfront to where he retreated every time the others bothered him. There, he had plenty of berries to eat, shade, and privacy. Sometimes he spent the night there, spying on couples who snuck away to mate in the sand.

No woman wanted to be with him, nor did any man want any woman to be with him, and he knew it. He also knew that he was the product of a cheating mother and an inbred. The tribesmen picked on him, called him bad names, and played tricks whenever they had the chance. Once they put a boar's carcass into his hut, which he found by his side as he woke the following morning. Other times they would challenge him to wrestling matches. Trying to prove that he had no fear, Basariche would accept and get beaten so badly that he'd need several days to heal. Torana spent more time wrapping his wounds than anyone else's.

Ithariche sometimes protected him, though he refused to acknowledge that they half-brothers. Any time Basariche complained about anyone, Ithariche would simply tell the

perpetrator to leave him alone.

Basariche sat on the sturdy seat, which wasn't as soft as the ones in the water room. He looked at the shattered reflector on the wall, still able to see parts of himself in the broken pieces. Before Ithariche had discovered it, he and some other men had a fun sticking out their tongues and making silly faces. He couldn't understand why Ithariche would smash such a wonderful wall. They could have amused themselves for hours just looking into it.

A tube of white flimsy fabric hung on a small rack beside him. He pulled on the end and tore off a piece. It smelled like flowers. He blew his mucus into it, and then dropped it onto the ground.

Why would anyone sit in here? he wondered. The seat didn't face the reflector, and there wasn't anything to look at in front of him except a silver rack with cloths hanging from it. There was no table.

Basariche stood, looking closely at the white seat. He flipped it open so the top hit the back. Within was a basin of water. Even stranger, there was another oval lid beneath the top one that covered only the edges. He flipped that one, too, then

stared at the water, which undoubtedly came from the hole at the bottom.

For washing, he thought, dunking his head in, then ringing out his hair. At last, he had discovered something that everyone could use.

...

Banca walked to the other side of the lower level, searching for Madarain. Several men gathered around one of the small chambers. Inside, Basariche was dunking his head into the white basin of water. A light flashed at him, sparked by a gadget that Crediche held. At first Banca thought it was a weapon, something that would blind another man during combat. But the men were smiling, so he knew it couldn't be. Crediche pulled a square shape from the gadget and everyone gathered to look.

Basariche pressed the lever on the side of the basin. The water began spiraling downward.

The Tores jumped back. One man grabbed his spear.

'What is it doing?'

'The water is leaving.'

'Where is it going?'

'More water is returning!'

'More water! New water!'

Peering over one another, the Tores anxiously watched to see what the water would do next. After refilling, it calmed again, just like a puddle after a storm.

'You were scared!'

'He pointed his spear!'

'Beware, the water is changing!'

'We press this after we finish washing our heads. Fresh water replaces the old.'

Madarain walked by, seeing another man on his knees, dunking his head into the bowl. *'That is for our wastes,'* he said.

The men fell silent.

'The pale men release, then bury their wastes in there.'

Basariche ran his fingers through his hair. *'Are you certain?'*

Madarain held back a laugh, remaining dark and serious.

'Yes.'

Some of the men couldn't stop laughing as Basariche and another man ran into the chamber of running water to wash their heads under the ever-flowing stream.

'Madarain, we must speak,' Banca said, pulling him aside.

They walked into a chamber on the other side of the hut and sat on the long soft seat. Also inside the room were two individual soft seats, two square panes with bright fabric, and several ornaments atop multiple shelves. A few men wandered near the chamber, but Banca signaled them to turn away.

'You wish to speak to me about Ithariche?' Madarain asked, attempting to look into Banca's eyes, which drifted around the room.

'Yes. I fear he has gone mad.'

'What are you proposing, Banca?' Madarain's voice faded to a whisper. *'A rebellion?'*

'Of course not,' Banca said without hesitation. *'I fear Ithariche's judgment is clouded, so we must be extra careful while providing council. The next mistake could cost us our lives.'*

Madarain cracked a smile, his first in the new land. *'Do you believe you have control over your own destiny?'*

After many revolutions and many conversations, Banca was used to Madarain subtly ridiculing everything he said. Oftentimes, he would ignore Madarain's pessimistic philosophy and continue trying to get his point across.

'Do you?'

'The prophecy is our fate. We can fight till our deaths or we can surrender, but either way we lose.'

'Perhaps I should tell Ithariche that you believe such nonsense,' Banca said, clenching his fists the moment he saw Madarain's arrogant smirk.

'Perhaps I should tell him about your rebellion.'

After many disagreements, Banca had never felt the urge to kill Madarain until then. He could have easily grabbed his throat and squeezed, crushing the larynx between his thumb and forefinger with a blissful *crunch*, savoring the jolt of energy that shot from his fingers to his brain.

Banca stood and walked away, knowing Madarain would inform Ithariche of the conversation. Then they would kill him. He felt for the gold and silver stubs in his satchel, rolling them between his fingers.

...

Ithariche went down to the room with the food, looking for something to feed the prisoners. On one of the shelves, he found several small jars labeled with a baby's smiling face. He grabbed a few, then looked through the large white box. Inside one of the

compartments he found some orange spikes and light green leaves.

He went straight to the hostage's chamber, twisted the unusual but intelligent golden knob, and pushed open the entrance, expecting the woman to scream, and maybe even attack him.

The pale woman slept in a chair, tears drying on her cheeks, the baby sleeping in her arms. Ithariche felt a lump in his throat and a twinge of moisture in his eyes.

Ithariche had never tried to have a child, not even with his permanent mate, Valsa. Though he admired a woman's beauty as any man would, he simply hadn't the urge to embrace one. He kept this information deep within himself, and would hack to death anyone who accused him of preferring men, let alone any man who actually did. In his most inebriated moments, he'd catch himself drifting into forbidden fantasies about Toriche - his own mate's father - swallowing those thoughts before delivering a jagged slash to the back of his hand.

As for Toriche and Torana's daughter, the pure, wondrous flower of a woman, he promised her they'd mate when he was ready. Then, he was ready, not because he suddenly didn't have her by his side, but because he wouldn't let the opportunity pass if

they succeeded in meeting again.

Ithariche forced his eyes away from the child as he placed the rations on the fuzzy ground. *No harm will come to either of them*, he thought as he exited, closing the gate behind him.

10

Ellen heard the door hinges creak, but she couldn't bear to open her eyes. If she were being rescued, she'd have known instantly because someone would have heard her rescuers.

A tense, horrible silence followed. She clenched her eyes, took shallow breaths, and tightened her grip around Jeremy, who had fallen asleep again.

A moment later, the door clicked shut, but she knew better than to think that the *whoever-it-was* had left for good.

Another minute passed, but nobody touched her or said a word. In fact, she wondered why *whoever-it-was* entered the room at all. Did he wish to rape her, then have second thoughts? Was he just checking up on her, like any good host would? Was he still standing there, inches from her face, waiting for her eyes to open so she could watch him strangle her to death?

She had to look, even if meant catching a glimpse of the silent kidnapper/rapist/baby-killer psychopath.

Be brave, Ellen. One the count of three...

One. Two. Three.

Her eyes popped open. Through a pool of clinging tears, she saw the closed door.

There was something on the floor. Carrots and lettuce. Unwrapped. And three jars of baby food.

It could be poisoned, she thought. *Poisoned? Why would they try poisoning me? Why wouldn't they just kill me?*

Her stomach growled. She *couldn't, shouldn't, wouldn't* eat that food. The seal on the baby food, though, was intact. But she'd save that - all of it - for Jeremy.

The Mickey Mouse clock above the crib said it was 1 p.m. She hadn't eaten since the previous night, after she barbequed the last few pieces of steak on the grill outside and ate with Bill before they began packing for the trip.

She needed water more than food, anyway. She'd been crying and sweating for hours.

Yet, Jeremy hadn't sucked her dry. She had a teensy bit of milk left. Pulling her breast over her nightgown, she pointed her nipple to her palm and squeezed out a few drops. Then she slurped it.

Her dry mouth was now doused with a filmy taste. The room smelled of dirty diapers. She was going to empty it before they took off for Maryland, until...

All of a sudden she started gagging. Jeremy felt her sharp movements, woke and began hissing. She sprang to her feet and placed him in the crib, then bent over to the floor as her stomach churned, grasping for something to send upward.

Finally, like a solid lump, gas came gusting out of her throat in a relieving burp. She fell back into her chair, breathing heavily, her forehead soaked with more fluid that she could afford to spare.

Jeremy's wailing grew louder, but soon he fell silent as she picked him up and rested him against her breasts.

11

Ithariche returned to the chamber with the mystical screens, but each one was still as a painted image. The pale men and wheeled carts were gone, and so were the shining wings.

Then he saw movement on one of them. It was a pale boy walking across the picture of the square pond, tossing something around.

A trap, he thought.

The boy opened the divider to the small hut in the corner, entered, and exited a moment later. He walked to the water and bent at the edge. At first, Ithariche thought he was cupping his hands for a drink. However, the boy never brought his hands to his mouth. He certainly wasn't fishing, especially since the clear pond didn't have a single creature, plant or rock within. The boy stood from his crouch and returned to the small hut. He closed it, and then walked out of the picture.

Ithariche watched for a few more minutes, waiting for the boy to return. Then it occurred to him: The boy, sent by the pale men, had put a disease into the water, which steadily flowed into the tub on the main level.

...

Crediche hadn't stopped giggling about Basariche dunking his head in the pale man's waste bowl, and he kept the square image tucked in his satchel as a reminder. He couldn't wait to show his mother, Torana, and sister, Valsa when they returned to the island.

He put down his image-capturing gadget and went to wash himself under the flowing water. Torana was always telling him to keep clean, and only after hearing her constant nagging did he

make washing a habit.

Someone screamed, just as he went to stick his head underneath the spring. Ithariche burst into the chamber, grabbed the boy's shoulders and pulled him away.

'Diseased,' he said, almost hissing.

Standing in the corner, Basariche spit out a mouthful of water and dropped a clear container, which shattered on the floor. Banca walked by and jumped as the shards came sliding toward his feet.

'Clumsy fool!' Banca picked up a shard and held it to Basariche's throat.

'Banca!' Ithariche ran over, then shrieked and grabbed his own foot. Blood seeped from a straight slice down the center of his big toe on his right foot.

Banca withdrew the glass from Basariche's face and grabbed a white square cloth and handed it to Ithariche.

'Clean this!' Ithariche snapped at Basariche while standing on one foot, squeezing the wound and wiping the blood.

Basariche bent over and gathered the pieces, placing them in the white flimsy bag that lined the waist-high container.

Ithariche wrapped the cloth around his gash, pinching it

together with his toes so it wouldn't fall off.

'*The water is diseased?*' Banca asked.

'Yes,' Ithariche said. *These shards will be my death!*

12

Chris Jacoby walked across his backyard to the neighbor's pool, whistling and tossing around the shed keys. The Steinbergs paid him to do chores because Bill was busy with work and Ellen spent most of her time with the baby. Besides cleaning the pool - which they barely used since Jeremy was born - Chris mowed the lawn, trimmed the hedges, turned on the sprinklers and would get their mail and newspaper while they were away. Cleaning the pool was easy money, but mowing their huge lawn - not to mention his own - was a pain. Usually, he would do both lawns in one day - the only real exercise he got - then relax for a week and a half before doing it again.

The Jacoby family spent the morning on the porch, watching the commotion around the plane that had landed in the middle of the street. They even ate breakfast outside - egg sandwiches and bacon that his mother cooked - just in time to see the medics pull out a body and wheel it into an ambulance. His father even did an interview with television reporters.

After the police had removed the plane and the onlookers and journalists left the scene, Chris went back inside to play games on his PlayStation 2. A few hours later, his mother told him he was wasting a perfectly good day. He ignored her and continued playing. Then she turned off the television, right before he was about to win another match of WWF Smackdown. That's when he got up to do his chores.

He entered the Steinbergs' shed, got the pool chemicals, and put them in the water. Every couple of days he would have to get the net and scoop out whatever fell in. He made a game out of catching the water spiders that ran around the surface.

Chris returned home, brought a bag of potato chips up to his room, locked the door, played video games, and fell asleep at 10 p.m.

13

"I need three Ocean Prowlers," Jack Rachel yelled to the ninth different person on the phone that afternoon.

George Kraser seemed so normal, and he came highly recommended. But Jack knew that meant very little, as even good employees could turn out differently than he expected. But flying a plane back to shore and leaving the campers? The worst he had

to deal with previously was the time he hired some contractors to clean up the lots of some homes he had demolished. Two of the helpers got into a fight, and one beat the other to death with a shovel. That set back the project a whole week.

The second session of camp was to start Monday morning. Assuming everyone would be rescued, and Simmons, Stewart and Weber agreed to continue counseling that summer, he'd still have to find another pilot and an aircraft. He had already called Adventure Flights that morning, but it didn't have any GH-C4s - or similar models - available for another two weeks.

He booked the flights anyway. At the very worst, he'd only have to refund the money for the first and second sessions.

Jack had never visited the island. A hotshot Los Angeles plastic surgeon insisted on including it in a deal for some coastal real estate. The doctor had planned on building a house there, but decided against it when his wife divorced him.

Always in the business for turning land into money, Jack hired a few people to scout the area. Several ideas came to mind, such as building a resort and a casino since it wasn't in U.S. territory, but that would take time and even bigger investments than he was willing to spend.

Then his wife suggested that he use it as a summer camp. He'd charge an outrageous price for rich kids to experience the ultimate survival trip on a deserted island. The money came rolling in, more than double the cost of operation.

Not only that, Jack saw this as an opportunity to help a few under-privileged children. Ever since he started paying cash for homes in poor neighborhoods - at incredible bargains since the sellers were mostly drug addicts - community leaders organized protests and tarnished his name in the papers. A reverend once called him 'Vampire Jack' for 'sucking the life out of the community.' Jack wasn't doing anything illegal. His lawyers made sure of it. Regardless, granting a few scholarships to poor kids would not only improve his image in the community, but also give him some tax write-offs.

"What happened to your other pilot? Was he the guy who landed that plane in the middle of the road this morning?" the woman on the other line asked.

"No." Jack shuffled through some papers. "I'm faxing you the coordinates now."

"We can have two Ocean Prowlers ready for you this afternoon," the woman said.

"I need at least three, as soon as possible! I'm paying out of my own pocket for this! I'll stick a grand in it for you too! Just get those damn helicopters!" He stuck the paper into the fax machine, dialed the number and pressed SEND.

"Mr. Rachel, how many passengers do you need transported?"

"Twenty."

"Then you're going to need four Ocean Prowlers."

"Fine! Did you get the coordinates?"

"They're printing right now, Mr. Rachel."

"Get those choppers as fast as you can!" he said, then slammed down the phone and looked at his calendar. Steinberg never showed up.

14

The dead man's stench tarnished the air in the lowest level. Ithariche exhaled slowly through his nose, then inhaled quickly through his mouth, believing this odor to be the corpse's final revenge.

Hraptor has not risen from the dead, he thought, though he didn't expect it. After his father died, his mother told him a story about Hraptor - in mortal skin - being killed by other mortals on a stake before rising from his own death. In his

death, Hraptor became a savior to the pale men. They worshiped him so they could live in his eternal paradise when they passed away.

Had Retariche still been alive and known what Honta was telling their son, he would have slaughtered her, just like he slaughtered her lover, Moriche. The former leader wouldn't tolerate lies, nor would he tolerate beliefs that contradicted his own. Once, he put to death a member of his council for suggesting that a woman should be forced to change mates if her current one couldn't impregnate her.

Though Ithariche rarely punished those for having differing views or criticizing tradition, especially Madarain, he sometimes couldn't help but question the very laws that he enforced. With the women out of their lives, perhaps he could lift the restriction of intimate relations between men.

He rejected the thought the same moment it came, and he wished to hang himself from a tree for allowing such blasphemy into his head. Even hinting at that would give Toriche, Madarain, Banca or any other man a reason to overthrow him. He shivered, brushed aside the thought and continued exploring the chamber.

The lowest level was far less elegant than the other

sections of the grand hut. The walls and floor were made from flat grey stone. Long tree fragments lined the ceiling with pink wool stuffed in between. Then he saw a small chamber in the corner.

Ithariche grabbed Hraptor by the arms and dragged him there. Inside were two large white boxes, one with a lid on top and the other with a gate on the side. Curiously, he pulled open the hatch and found piles of colored garments within. He wished to sort through the items, but the foul stench of death entered him again, so he dropped the corpse and departed, closing the gate behind him.

Across the main room he saw a pole with black heavy wheels attached on either side, resting on two stands placed between a long bench. There were silver gadgets clamped on the ends to hold the wheels in place. The pole also had barriers on either side to keep the wheels from sliding inward.

Unsure of what he was doing, Ithariche loosened the silver clamps and slid them off the pole, then removed the thick wheels and placed them on the ground. The pole was far heavier than a spear. He played with it for a moment, rolling it in his hands, twirling it around, and thrusting it forward as if sparring an

invisible opponent. It wasn't sharp on either end, nor was it light enough to maneuver quickly, so he returned it to its stand.

On a table he found more heavy wheels of different sizes. Then it occurred to him that the pale men used these wheels to test their strength. They probably attached them on either side so they could lift what their muscles would allow. Perhaps they did this because manual labor wasn't enough to make them stronger. The dead pale man was thin, and probably didn't spend much time lifting these at all, he thought.

Aside from overpowering one another during wrestling matches, the Tores showed off their strength by balancing people on their bodies. In his younger days, Toriche could hold a man on his shoulders while lifting a woman in each arm - both of whom were holding a child. Ithariche once tried lifting Valsa on his shoulders, but put her down immediately when he felt a pain shoot down his lower back.

Near the smaller wheels were several weighty objects with handles. He picked up two of them. The heavy ends extended further than his curled fist. Drawing it back, he punched the wall, leaving black marks on either side. Though these handles seemed to be smaller versions of the pole with the wheels,

Ithariche hadn't a clue why anyone would use them. They weren't heavy enough to increase anyone's strength.

Figuring out the pale man's lifestyle was fascinating - each object surely served a purpose, but he had too much else on his mind at the moment. Ithariche wondered if the pale men and children back on the island had any idea how to heal wounds with the round leaf, smoke cannabis, or cook the edible roots. Over time, perhaps they would teach themselves. After all, the first Tormentcaches had to do the same.

Perhaps no one would come to rescue them. They would remain there, befriend the Tore women, have children, hunt the boars, feast during the full moon, feud with Hraptor, and forget their past.

Ithariche briefly laughed, pushing aside his troubles for a moment as he returned to the upper level.

15

Ellen Steinberg felt a migraine coming on. Her throat burned, cold sweat dried on her nightgown, and her nipples were still sore from feeding Jeremy that morning. The child had a strong jaw, and he had already finished a jar and a half of baby food - apples and cream - before falling back to sleep.

Whoever-it-was didn't provide her with a spoon, so she had to use her index finger. She was glad that she wasn't wearing any fingernail polish.

Her eyes occasionally fluttered open, releasing the tears that built up behind her lids. This time they stayed open as she saw something new on the floor, in the same place the carrots and lettuce had been before she ate them.

It was a tall glass, one from her cabinet, filled near to the brim with water. Again, someone had been in the room without her knowing, right in front of her as she slept. Though this frightened her to no ends, she was glad she didn't have to see their faces.

For the first time in several hours, she stood from the rocking chair, feeling twinges in her knees as her legs straightened. She placed Jeremy in his crib and put the clown blanket over him. His three-month-old body shifted, his pudgy fingers curled, and his cheeks tensed and relaxed with each breath.

Ellen turned around, wondering if another object would mysteriously appear with her back turned. She picked up the glass and sniffed. The water was room temperature - which meant it

could have been sitting there for hours. There didn't seem to be anything wrong with it. *Why would there be?* she asked herself. The carrots and lettuce tasted fine, though she didn't normally eat them raw.

Without thinking any further, she drank every bit, then coughed after swallowing too fast.

It wasn't much, but she felt a sudden burst of energy as the liquid flowed down her throat to her stomach. She needed to get out, and fast. She would wrap Jeremy in a blanket and carry him in her left arm. She'd open the door, dash to the right, straight to the stairs. The front door was at the end. She'd open it and run onto the porch, down the lawn, screaming.

But what if...

...whoever-it-was was standing outside the door, with a frying pan, prepared to swat her on the head if she tried to escape? *Whoever-it-was* had been pretty nice up until that point. After all, they gave her food and water, and left her alone.

They could have...

She stopped herself. They could have done anything they wanted to her, but the possibilities weren't worth thinking about.

She had to stay. If keeping her alive inside the house was what her captors wanted, it wasn't the worst thing in the world.

Ellen flopped back into the rocking chair and resumed crying.

16

Madarain counted each man, including himself. Walking down from the upper level, Banca was the 25th and final person he saw. He could think of six grown men who didn't make the trip. They were probably back on the island, forcibly taking any woman they desired, killing the pale children, believing Ithariche and the others to be dead.

During his stroll, Madarain admired the realistic etchings along the walls, seeing some pale men and women who looked to have lived at least 60 or 70 revolutions. No Tore lived that long. By the time most of them hit 50, their skin would taper, their hair would turn grey and they'd spend their final days lying in their huts and complaining about the weather.

The only real joy Madarain could see anyone getting out of life was finding mutual love, and that rarely happened because of the Tore traditions. The women were forced into relationships with men who repeatedly raped and beat them. Madarain never did

such a thing, though sometimes he wished he had grabbed the woman of his choice.

Revolutions before, after Retariche died and while Ithariche was growing into his role as leader, Toriche and Madarain had their eye on the same woman - Torana.

After a feast one night, Torana and Madarain sat together by the salty water, talking and watching the stars until the nearest one rose. He told her about his interest in the heavens, and showed her the bright stars he believed not to be stars at all, but other great spheres where people lived.

She told him about her interest in medicine, and how she wished to one day be the tribe's first female healer. She believed all illnesses had cures that had yet to be discovered, and given the opportunity, she could raise the average age of death several revolutions.

Madarain fell in love that night, deeply admiring the wisdom of this woman. Not once did he allow himself to touch her. He couldn't bring himself to do it for the same reason he wouldn't want to tear the most beautiful flower from its root. Such an angel shouldn't be forced into mating with anyone but the man of her choosing, and Madarain didn't believe that he might be that

man. But it wasn't a woman's place to pursue a mate, and Madarain later realized that he had sabotaged any chance of being with her by shunning tradition.

At the next feast of the full moon, Toriche got a hold of her. At the same time, Veema - not a traditional woman by any means - aggressively pursued Madarain. He reluctantly settled, and had twin daughters, Lameena and Lusha.

It wasn't until five revolutions later when Madarain was able to help fulfill Torana's dream. The moment they dropped the healer's corpse into the forest, Madarain convinced Ithariche that Torana was best suited for the vacant position. Ithariche - and her mate Toriche - agreed, considering that no other man at the time wanted the responsibility of delivering children, maintaining the round leaf oils, or tending to ill people.

Torana never knew of Madarain's deed. Toriche claimed responsibility, giving her at least one reason to love him.

Toriche didn't deserve that credit. He didn't deserve her at all. Many a time Madarain wished to spear that man through the heart, tie large stones to him and drag him into the salty water, where the fish would eat his flesh.

Perhaps now, in the hours before the destroyer came to bring

an end to their miserable existence, Toriche would have an accident.

17

The Tores spent the rest of the day sitting around, observing the pale man's gadgets, flipping through pages of realistic images, and eating. Madarain found a tool that cut through the rims of the cylindrical cans, then cleanly pulled off the lids and divided portions so everyone got at least a taste. There were yellow pellets, mushy brown beans, strips of beef, pinky-sized greens, and stale sliced fruit. That wasn't enough for them.

Hours after the nearest star had dipped below the horizon, Ithariche saw through the clear panes that the lights had extinguished within the nearby dwellings.

'Now we will hunt,' he said, selecting Toriche, Madarain, Banca and Crediche for the mission.

'This is not like hunting boars,' he said. *'You must enter the nearest dwelling the same way we entered this one. Kill the prey and bring him through the rear entrance. Then, we shall feast!'*

Ithariche had eaten flesh only once - that of the foreigner

who had floated to their shores after his father died. He remembered he had difficulty chewing, and spent the entire night picking the chunks from between his teeth.

Other than the pale children on the shining wings, that was the only time in his life that an outsider stumbled upon their island. It happened three times during Retariche's reign. Ithariche's father described how he would tear off their flesh and use the round leaves to keep them alive as long as possible as he devoured them. When the last bit of flesh was stripped, he'd taunt Hraptor by tossing the skeletons into the salty water so they would float back to the Favored Land.

Ithariche didn't care for Retariche's excessive torture, but the tales of lost wanderers fascinated him nonetheless. According to legend, shining wings once crashed into their forest, navigated by a single man. Many believed him to be the destroyer, on a mission to fulfill the prophecy. As the wings burned, the tribesmen pulled him out, stuck a pole through his stump and roasted him. After a storm quenched the fire, they found a large U-shaped cylinder aboard the wings. Itharain - Retariche's father - claimed it was a great weapon that could annihilate the entire island in a mushroom-cloud of smoke.

Some said they pushed the great weapon back into the salty water. Others said it never existed at all. Ithariche heard from his mother that Itharain's council was found dead after they tried cracking it open. No one else repeated such a tale. Honta told Ithariche many things after his father died, but he wasn't sure what to believe from a woman who had an affair with an inbred man.

Madarain slid open the large clear pane in the back, and Ithariche watched as his council exited.

Now there will be no coup, the leader thought.

...

The four hunters stood atop the wooden structure, peering over the edge. The full moon's wrinkled reflection shined in the square pond below. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, and Madarain could see the seven stars of the great scoop pointing toward the planet's northernmost point. However, fewer stars peeped through the heavens in the Favored Land, a view far less impressive than what they could see back home.

Several bands of light suddenly streaked downward and disappeared. Crediche anxiously pointed them out, but everyone saw. The elders used to say they were Hraptor's tracks as he

traveled through the heavens. Madarain believed they were just remnants of dust floating through space before taking a quickened dive into the Great Sphere, leaving a trail of light as they fell. He never took for granted the beauty of the heavens, and he was sure the pale man knew plenty more about the mysteries of the skies, even with a dimmer view. They probably had an explanation for many of the universal wonders. Hraptor wouldn't deny them that knowledge.

The bitterness alone was enough to send the Tormentcaches out to kill one or more of these spoiled beings, but Madarain agreed to go only because refusing would cause more trouble. He had nothing personal against the pale man. He even reconsidered taking revenge against Toriche, believing fate would prevail and the oafish captain would get what he deserved. Hurting him somehow would surely stir up other regrets, and the motive - jealousy - simply wasn't good enough. He decided he wouldn't succumb to such temptations when Toriche's brutal end was inevitable.

His knees shaking, Madarain realized for the first time in the Favored Land that he was nervous. He knew they had been extremely lucky so far, and their current mission would

undoubtedly unveil their presence to the enemy. Maybe Ithariche sent them on purpose, sacrificing them like Retariche sacrificed his commanders when he realized they were a threat to his authority. Maybe he sent Crediche - an inexperienced child - along to endanger the mission.

But even if they managed to kill a pale man and drag him back, the scent would be obvious, and they would be discovered even sooner.

Regardless, Madarain knew it was only a matter of time before Hraptor's army found the lost tribe of the Tormentcaches. Perhaps the grand hut would burn, and they would burn with it, just as the prophecy said.

As they stepped through the gate of the wooden barrier that separated stretches of land between the huts, Crediche couldn't help but jump up and down. He could hardly believe that Ithariche let him hunt alongside the leaders, and couldn't wait to tell his mother all about it the moment they returned home. *'Where are the boars? Are we gonna surround one?'*

Damn child, Banca thought.

Madarain ignored him, looking around carefully to see if they were being observed.

Toriche finally quieted his son by threatening to send him back.

Banca walked a few paces behind the others, wondering if he could convince Toriche to kill Ithariche. He would say that Ithariche abused his daughter. No, that wouldn't work, since he seemed to stay clear of Valsa. Perhaps Ithariche secretly preferred men, something Banca had long suspected, as she had yet to conceive a child. The tribe would surely turn against him then, but only if he were caught trying to embrace one. If not, Banca's accusation would cost him his life, even if it were true.

Toriche looked admiringly at the grand huts and the land between them. He had never dreamed they would be in such a place. With this land, they would have the capabilities of creating something greater than the shining wings or bigger than the pale man's dwellings. The outsiders had everything while the Tormentcaches suffered in the middle of the vast salty waters, not even in view of the Favored Land. With Hraptor defeated, they finally had direction, starting with the hut down the path, through the gate, and to the right.

Ellen hadn't gotten out of the chair for three hours, and

that was to pee in the diaper bin for the second time that day. Before that, she got up to change Jeremy's diaper for the third time. Luckily, she kept several boxes of pampers, rags and baby powder in the nursery.

As Jeremy slept in the crib, she rocked back and forth, forcing herself to think about more pleasant times. She thought about the slumber parties that she and her friends used to have every Friday night, her wedding day, her honeymoon in the Bahamas, and the bliss she felt after giving birth to Jeremy only three months earlier. But each special thought turned ugly as she heard the deep foreign voices murmuring somewhere in the house.

Sometimes she heard laughter - joyous laughter like old buddies playing poker. Other times, soft chatter. Twice did she feel the thumping of footsteps as someone darted through the hallway. The silence was the worst.

There seemed to be a shadow underneath the crease of the door, though she couldn't tell for sure because the hall light wasn't on. Perhaps someone was sitting there, guarding her. Surely, after several hours, the guard would fall asleep. She would quickly open the door, hit him with one of the wooden bars she'd pry off of the crib, and run out of the house with Jeremy.

But the foreign psychopath would catch the weapon, pull it from her grasp, bat her across the face, knock the child from her hands and rape her. He'd hold back her head so she could get a glimpse of Bill's bloodied corpse body in the hall.

Her cheeks pulled back, eyes clamped shut and her right hand clenched the left above her stammering heart.

"Oh God please help me!" she shrieked. Then Jeremy started crying, but she left him alone as she reached for her face and clawed her fingernails into her flesh.

A moment later, she let go and her eyes scrolled up to the clock on the wall. Both of Mickey Mouse's hands pointed to the 12, almost mockingly.

'Look how long you've been in here, haha!' it said in its high-pitched voice over Jeremy's wails. *'You're gonna die in here, haha! You and the kid will die, but I'll still be ticking, haha!'*

Bile rose to her throat. She stumbled to the diaper bin, spewing lettuce and carrots onto the lid before the rest fell inside. Her knees buckled and she rolled to the floor in the fetal position, head hitting the carpet.

'You're gonna die, haha!' Mickey, in his red overalls with

two buttons, danced in her head. His oversized white gloves turned to hooks and his arms twirled as he came at her.

She could hear the phone ringing.

19

The noise came from a handle that was attached to long curly twine, hanging on a box on the wall. Basariche jumped back.

He slapped the handle off the box and it crashed to the floor.

"Hello?" a voice came from the handle.

'Hraptor!' Basariche yelled.

"Bill?" the handle said. "Who's there?"

Other Tores gathered, watching Basariche stand over the handle like a man over a mouse. He picked it up, speaking into one of the ends.

'Hraptor, we shall kill you!'

"Bill? Where the hell is Bill?" the handle's small, fuzzy voice continued.

The crowd gathered around him and Basariche grimaced. Perhaps then they would never bother him again. All their lives they challenged Hraptor, holding vigorous fists to the salty water as a great storm swept through their village. Now,

Basariche spoke directly to him.

'Come to us, Hraptor, and we shall fight to the death!'

"Who the hell is this? Where's Bill?"

Ithariche came running in, pinching his lips shut with a finger and thumb.

"Who's there? I'm calling the police!" the handle yelled into Basariche's now worried face.

Ithariche displayed a ferocious scowl and veins popped out of his neck. He shot out his arm, clenched his half-brother by the throat and squeezed. The talking handle crashed to the leveled ground as Basariche's eyeballs stammered upward. Three gasping breaths followed, then a *crunch*.

The leader released, letting the corpse slump to the ground. The talking handle made one final sound before Ithariche tore it from the coiling wire and dropped it beside Basariche's body.

No one moved or said anything. They just stared, trying to make sense of Ithariche's slaying of a fellow Tore - not just any man, but his own bastard kin.

Retariche had killed the father, now Ithariche killed the son and his half-brother. Some of the tribesmen reflected back to Retariche's murder of Moriche. Before anyone could work up the

courage to ask him why, Ithariche made an announcement.

'Basariche had reacted with the pale man. This will cause the war.'

That was the only thing he could think to say. He knew that incident either meant his death or reestablished his leadership. A moment passed... a very long moment.

'He is right! We must follow Ithariche and fight this war!'

With one tribesman's approval, the rest, one at a time, saluted him, upset for even questioning this man. Ithariche did the unthinkable, flying the tribe to the Favored Land, something not even Retariche would believe if they told him in the afterlife. Ithariche was their leader without question, their god.

20

Bob Jacoby watched television as Jill slept by his side in the king-sized waterbed. He was wearing a pizza-stained T-shirt and boxer shorts, watching the local cable news station, waiting for the interview he did that morning to come back on. He had seen it twice already, but this time he had a new tape in the VCR, and not an old one with the overwrite tab punched out. He pressed the record button.

"Did you hear the plane?" the reporter asked, shoving the microphone in his face. The plane was behind him.

"Yeah," Bob said. "I thought it was just a truck or something."

End of interview. He pressed the stop button, got up and labeled the tape with a marker, "Bob's interview," and stuck it on his video shelf beside tapes of his wedding day and Chris as a baby.

Finally, he had time to go get a beer. He walked out of his room and down the hall, then stepped down the stairs. A familiar buzzer hummed.

"Oh shit," he said, rolling his eyes, walking back to his room and waiting for the Hoover alarm company to call. He told Jill that he would turn on the alarm that night since he wanted to stay up to record his interview, but out of habit, she did anyway.

The phone rang. He picked it up.

"What's the password?"

"Margarita," he sighed. "Another accidental discharge."

"No problem, Mr. Jacoby," the alarm guy said as if he expected Bob to say that again. That had been the second time in

a month he had set off the alarm. The first time it happened, he was also getting a beer in the middle of the night.

Bob hung up the phone, shut down the alarm, and walked downstairs.

No problem, Mr. Jacoby, Bob thought mockingly. Soon the guy would be calling him 'Bob.'

He walked into the kitchen and grabbed a Budweiser from the fridge. With the door still open, he flipped the tab and took a long chug.

Glass shattered in the family room. He turned and saw his 18-year-old grey tabby cat darting through the kitchen, its tail straight and puffed as thick as its body.

"That's it! That damn cat's being put to sleep!" he yelled for the second time that day. Earlier, Woosums peed on the rug in the master bathroom, and he stepped in it - barefooted - when he went to use the toilet.

What in the hell did she break? Bob wondered.

He walked toward the family room, then stopped as he heard glass being pushed aside.

"Oh no!"

The beer still in his hand, Bob ran around to the foyer. He

pointed his finger at the buttons on the alarm module but suddenly couldn't remember which ones to push. "Oh no, no no no no!" He even forgot about the red panic button at the top. Foreign voices spoke in the family room.

"No no no no no!"

He turned and dashed toward the stairs, dropping the aluminum can and slipping on it with his bare right foot, sending him belly-first to the stone tile.

The last thing he saw was a child's foot wearing an anklet of small bones.

21

Toriche, Madarain, Crediche and Banca each held a limb as they hurriedly dragged the corpulent prey over the short green, its belly sliding along the ground. A few minutes later they were hauling their kill up the wooden structure and into the back entrance of the grand hut. Before the council even got him inside, others were telling of them of what happened to Basariche.

Toriche shrugged and Banca held in a smirk but remained expressionless. Madarain sighed, realizing that Ithariche was madder than he had thought. Perhaps Banca was correct about their

leader, even if he didn't use so many words to say it.

Ithariche came from the lowest level, where he had placed Basariche's body in the small chamber with the pale man's corpse.

Then he saw his council return with prey. He stood there, dumbfounded. Madarain noticed the leader's joyless reaction and wasn't the slightest bit surprised.

Crediche bragged about shoving the spear into the pale man's back. Toriche, too, was boasting about his son's accomplishment.

'*Very good.*' Ithariche forced a smile as they spread the corpse in the center of the room. Crediche flashed his device at everyone, then waited for the image to fade into view.

Ithariche walked to the red-stoned wall with the chilled opening. It was dark and ashy inside. There was a metal latch above. He released it, feeling a draft from above. He grabbed the chopped wood from the shining gold basket and stuck it into the opening.

Though he had spark stones in his satchel, the leader experimented with thin sticks that he found nearby because there was an image of flames on the container. He grabbed one and rubbed the red end against the rigid side of the box. A flare ignited, brightening the room along with the artificial light

that tracked overhead. He was amazed with its swiftness, which was certainly quicker than striking stones together and hoping the sparks would ignite the kindling.

Ithariche held the torch under the log. A short time later, a fire roared from within the red-stoned corner.

And then the tribe cheered and hailed him, their leader, sending out his best to retrieve the ultimate of feasts, and igniting flames to cook it in Hraptor's very own fire-hole.

Using the plastic bags for waste, they skinned the prey with their blades, stuck nuggets of flesh through their spears, and crowded around to cook it over the fire. There was too much, in fact. It was like having five boars to devour in one feast, otherwise the meat would become discolored and blanketed with insects.

To everyone's surprise, Toriche broke out the cannabis. He said he found it in the hut, but couldn't find any dried leaves to wrap it. Madarain found some parchment nearby. They tore off pieces, then rolled the plant as tightly as possible and lit the ends. Taking puffs, they quickly realized that the flavored weed was much weaker than what they smoked back home. Perhaps the Favored Land wasn't as good as it seemed.

...

How dare Ithariche kill his own brother, Banca thought while gnawing on a chunk of meat. Yet, everyone still loved him, and gave him full credit for sending out his council to hunt a pale man. *Why can't they see that he is mad?*

He got up and walked into another room, where several men, including Toriche, were sitting on the soft seats, smoking the stale cannabis. Banca asked Toriche if he could speak to him alone for a moment. He got up and they walked together into an empty room.

'Do you believe Ithariche is okay? He has not seemed like himself lately,' Banca said, still chewing, hoping that would keep the slyness out of his voice.

'He is our one true leader,' Toriche said, then entered a monologue about Ithariche's clear direction and purpose.

'Do you believe you'll ever see Valsa and Torana again?' Banca interrupted.

'Yes,' Toriche said, though hesitantly.

Banca nodded, then headed back to the big room to get more food, cursing under his breath.

...

Crediche didn't care for the taste of the human flesh, but he ate a few chunks anyway to stop the growls in his stomach. He sat on the first step of the angled pathway, flipping through bounded pages with realistic etchings. It was the same pale man and woman over and over again. *How silly*, he thought, pulling them from underneath a transparent cover before tearing them into several pieces.

'*Crediche*,' Banca said with a mouthful of food. '*Come with me.*'

Banca led Crediche to the upper level into one of the many rooms. This one had a few cushy seats and a wooden table. They could hear a child crying nearby.

'*Who is that?*' Crediche asked.

'*That is not important*,' Banca said. '*I must tell you about Ithariche.*'

...

Ithariche grabbed Toriche's shoulders and pulled him to the floor. Toriche clasped his hands over Ithariche's wrists, kept the momentum as he rolled himself over, dragging the leader by the arms and tugging him off-balance. The tribesmen stood around the chamber, cheering.

The food wasn't as good, the cannabis wasn't as strong, and they hadn't the same amount of space for wrestling, but they laughed and rooted for their leader to finally out-muscle the undisputed champion. A few moments later, Toriche managed to press Ithariche's shoulders to the ground. Match over. Ithariche stood and congratulated him.

One of the men watched from the corner, flashing Crediche's image-making device.

...

'You lie!' Crediche screamed. Ithariche was a good leader, even if he wore the pale man's robe, destroyed the magic reflectors and killed Basariche. And he certainly didn't prefer embracing other men. Banca had told him how proud he was that Crediche had killed that pale man, and that Ithariche had really sent the council out there so Hraptor's army would catch them.

Cheering erupted from the lower level.

The boy tried scooting underneath Banca's arm, but Banca shoved him against the wall and pinned him. Crediche tried to scream but the councilman's hand covered his jaw while the other cupped his throat. He squeezed until he felt the muscles in his hand cramp.

As Crediche slid to the floor, Banca shut his eyes and exhaled, feeling a shiver from his fingers to his head.

A moment later, he lugged the boy's body into Ithariche's chamber. He placed the corpse on the tall seat, and spun it around so it faced the six magic screens.

Ithariche had already killed one of their own, and he would be blamed for Crediche, too. The leader was running out of luck, and the others would soon see through his facade of righteousness.

Will this really work? Banca wondered, reaching into his satchel and clutching the pale man's amulet, walking back to the lower level to watch the wrestling matches.

Part III

1

Torana paced by her hut, hands on her hips, wondering why Toriche and the other men hadn't returned. There was something unsettling going on. The men had left just as the nearest star set, in the middle of the early feast, spears in hand but uncertainty in their eyes. Only six returned to the village.

Credarain, Horiche, Berchain, Ithain, Moniche and Brodain were the only grown men around. They sat by the fire, smoking

cannibas, snapping at the women who approached to ask questions. Torana tried eavesdropping but couldn't make out a word.

At a time when most normally slept, the women were awake, poking their heads outside the huts, speculating about what had happened to the men. Earlier, they heard the shining wings sputter back to life, then climbed to the treetops to see it fly away. Then, most believed their mates had frightened the intruders and sent them fleeing back to the Favored Land, especially since they had foiled that pale boy's attempt to burn the village. As time passed, they began believing that the Tore men themselves had left home on the wings.

Veema, Madarain's mate and a rather large woman compared to most, stormed out of her hut and approached the six men. *'Where is everyone? They have been gone long enough.'*

Only Credarain turned to her while the others continued taking puffs of cannabis.

'I will tell you now,' he said in no particular hurry, then took another drag of smoke and blew it out slowly. *'Ithariche and the others flew on the shining wings straight into the salty water. He left Hraptor's pale men to kill us.'*

'Liar!' Veema said as women across the village exited their

huts.

Torana wasn't sure whether or not to believe Credarain, though he hadn't a reason to make up such a story other than to humor himself and the men. He wasn't someone Torana would trust, but then again, there were few people she did trust.

If Credarain is not telling the truth, then where did they go? Torana thought.

Cedarain's knees cracked as he stood and stepped up to Veema. She didn't back away. Inches separated them, his grinning face peering down at her. She didn't have to take orders from this man, nor any of the others. He'd be punished, probably killed, for threatening her. Madarain wouldn't stand for it.

His fist struck her nose, sending her stumbling backward. Holding her face, she stood, and spoke through blood. *'If our leaders are dead, you will not rule us.'*

Cedarain stepped to her, his smile gone. *'I will be your new leader, and you will do as I say.'*

His extended arms shoved her to the ground and he climbed on, straddling her belly. Without even missing a drag of their cannabis, the other men stood and watched.

Then Torana knew. Toriche was dead, and so were Madarain,

Ithariche and all of the others. Without even time to mourn, the women would have to suffer under the leadership of Credarain and his council. Torana preferred the prophecy. Then she wondered if the destroyer's intentions were to have the Tormentcaches destroy themselves, Credarain leading the way.

Veema screamed. Mothers restrained their children from exiting their huts so they wouldn't have to witness what became of every woman at some point in her life.

Torana remembered her incident. It was 16 revolutions earlier, the last time she had danced at a full moon feast without boar's blood marking her face. That night, Toriche took her by the hand and dragged her into the woods. Every woman had her moment. It was a part of life, though it didn't usually happen before spectators.

'Credarain!' Shanta, his permanent mate, came running from her hut in tears. 'Stop!'

Credarain released Veema's arms as Shanta charged him, her shawl flying off of her scarred head. As she swung her fist, he caught her arm and twisted. A dulled snap and an awful shriek followed as Shanta fell to the ground, clutching her elbow.

Then something happened so quickly that Torana wasn't sure

if she saw correctly in the firelight. Veema's hand thrust toward Credarain's stomach and he doubled over. He fell backward between her legs. Veema stood, holding a small blade, freshly dipped in the man's blood.

The five men dropped their cannabis as several women came running from their huts. Lameena and Lusha passed out spears.

Credarain flopped around by the firelight, clutching his stomach and screaming. Veema got up and stood over him, double-gripping her blade, ready to plunge it deep inside him.

Berchain charged. With her good arm, Shanta dove for his feet, grabbing hold of his ankle before sending him forward to meet Veema's blade, which she stabbed into the back of his neck. Credarain rolled away as she withdrew her weapon and kicked Berchain to the side.

She screamed as the women of the tribe surrounded the other four men like hunters on a boar, weapons drawn.

Valsa came running across the village to Torana, arms spread. Torana grabbed her and the two embraced, Valsa's tears spilling over her mother's shoulders.

Only once had Torana seen something so sick, revolutions before when the foreigner washed to their shores. They were about

to perform the torturous ritual against sworn enemies of the Tormentcaches.

It took 20 women to secure the four men, jabbing and breaking their ribs with spears and strips of wood. With several women holding him down, Veema stuck the tip of the stake into Horiche's bottom. Six women lifted the stake into a hole in the ground as it cleaved into his guts, sinking him slowly, screams so appalling even the women involved turned away and gagged.

A gurgling sound came from Horiche's throat as his blurred vision caught a glimpse of the female faces who did this to him. His weight sank further into the spear. Slobber and blood dripped from his chin as his final sound was a subtle *yelp*.

Most women stood around, watching, knowing he deserved the punishment, but...

'Pull his legs,' Veema yelled over commotion.

Lameena and Lusha grabbed onto Horiche's ankles and yanked downward, stumbling to the ground as his body sank. His head jerked to the sky as the bloody pole exited his mouth like a long, wooden tongue.

The other three battered men went up the same way, shrieking so terribly that Torana and Valsa tried covering their ears and

screaming themselves to muffle the sounds. Children cried from the huts and a few mothers ran back to comfort them.

Blood dripped down their bodies as their arms and legs hung like wet cloths on tree branches. Brodain was the last of the impaled men to make a noise, which sounded like a baby boar squealing through a salivated mouthful of stones.

Torana turned to catch a glimpse, holding Valsa's face away from the disgusting sight. The four men looked to the heavens with stakes protruding from their mouths. Torana knew that getting the spears to exit properly was no easy task. Each one had to be aligned perfectly through the torso so it wouldn't get stuck inside, or exit through the throat.

Credarain inched along on his back slower than a turtle, pressing down on his stomach while sucking in air and blowing. Veema walked up to him, smiling through her fattened lip.

'We will do to you now what you have done to us...'

Toes pulled back, she kicked Credarain between the legs, making him screech. Still using one arm, Shanta helped flip Credarain onto his bloodied stomach as Veema ripped off his cloth and held the sharp side of a stake over his bottom.

Again, Torana snuck a peek as Veema and other women raised

him. The sharp tip shot up his buttocks and slowly wedged through his insides. His screams faded as he dropped lower. A moment later his head snapped back and the sharp tip of the stake ejected from his mouth. His feet hit the ground and his legs collapsed, eyes staring straight up the pole into the night.

'Tormentcache!' Veema screamed, blood on her hands.

'Tormentcache!' the women responded.

2

"What the hell are you doing?" Steve Simmons hollered between heavy breaths as he and Johnny Stewart came running back to the campsite, their shirts soaked with sweat.

While the others were already eating, Rusty scooped out some pasta, put it into a mess kit and handed it to a camper.

Steve looked into the pot and saw there were only a few servings left. "We need to ration this food! Quit eating. Quit eating, now! Cover it up and save it for later!"

The campers continued chewing, but didn't reach for any more.

"Steve, it was my idea," Meg said. "Everyone was hungry and we're going to look for more food anyway..."

"We need to do that before we finish off our rations,"

Johnny said, resting his hands on his knees and catching his breath.

"But I'm hungry now," a camper whimpered.

"Did you find anything in the woods?" Billy asked with a mouthful of pasta.

Johnny began to say something but Steve cut in.

"No, we didn't find anything," he said without hesitation, then motioned for Johnny, Meg and Rusty. The four counselors met by the fire as the campers either finished or put away their food.

Steve spoke. "Here's what we're gonna do..."

...

In the sand, Johnny and his group scratched 'HELP' in 20-foot letters, reinforcing the marks with logs so the tide wouldn't wash it away when the tide came in.

After that, Johnny showed them how to make fishing rods out of long sticks and the equipment in their survival packs, which included a small bobber, a hook and a line. For bait, they returned to the area surrounding Brendan's grave, which the campers had marked with stones spelling out his name. Johnny thrust his shovel into the dirt and tossed it aside, again seeing

the massive worms nudging their way through the underground. He plunged his hand into the dirt and pulled one out at a time, passing them to the campers. The only girl in his group didn't want to touch the slimy creature so Johnny baited her hook himself. He didn't know what her problem was - his daughters weren't scared of worms.

They waded waist-deep into the ocean and cast out the lines. It took the entire afternoon to catch three fish, though several escaped with the unusually large worm. Johnny had been fishing since his third birthday, but he had no idea what kind of fish they were catching. They measured about a foot long but had no dorsal fin - just a hump along the back. He estimated they weighed at least 4 to 6 pounds, which was massive for fish of that length.

As the campers watched, Johnny cut out the gills and large blood vessels next to the backbone. Then he scaled and gutted them, chopped off the heads, and handed them over to Rusty.

Meanwhile, Steve and Meg helped the others gather firewood and berries in the surrounding area.

While everyone else was away, Rusty stayed by the fire, adding leaves and whatever else he could find that would create a

thick black trail of smoke leading to the sky.

...

"Hey, Rusty, got anymore of that fish?" Billy asked as he and Shawn approached the center of the camp, where the counselor-in-training was sorting the firewood into four piles - kindling, limbs, branches and logs.

"Nope," Rusty said, snapping a long branch. "You better go catch yourself some."

"I hate fishing," Billy said. "It's the most boring thing. You bait a hook, toss it out and wait for a dumb-ass fish to bite."

"It's for survival, fool." Rusty tore a small dead branch off of a larger one, and tossed it into the pile. "What are you gonna eat, then? You could hunt yourself one of them mice running around."

"I'll eat it if you cook it," Shawn said. He saw them darting through the campground the night before while everyone was in bed.

"Then go chase after one," Rusty replied. "The more you catch, the more you eat."

"Screw that, I'm eating berries," Billy said, and the two

boys walked away.

Rusty looked at his watch. It was 3:34 p.m. The day's recap: He woke up, went to the funeral, gathered firewood, listened to Steve and Johnny tell him and Meg about their encounter with the native women, cooked fish, gathered more firewood, and watched water boil.

Seeing that no one else was around, Rusty put on his earphones, which were attached to the walkman in the front pocket of his shorts. Scotch tape replaced the missing battery cover. He didn't let anyone know he still had it; they would surely want to listen.

He scanned up and down the AM dial for radio waves, wondering if any of the California signals spilled that far into the Pacific. Only static. Fortunately, he had a mixed tape of hard rock songs from his favorite underground bands: The Hard-ons, White Goo and Leper's Pecker.

He pressed play, hearing an uppity beat drone out.

Awe, crap, these are brand new! he thought. His extra batteries were on the plane, inside his acoustic guitar with his other tapes.

Rusty tossed some leaves into the fire, then sniffed the

air. He felt a warm rush in his head for a couple of seconds as if he took a bong hit off of some new kind of herb. *What the hell?* he thought, suddenly hypnotized by the dark smoke slithering up from the fire.

...

Steve and Meg led a group of girls to a water hole southwest of the camp. An underground spring poured in from the west where the land was a bit higher. They had changed into their swimsuits, and brought along soap and shampoo.

As the other girls waded in, Deanna knelt on the edge, looking at the water, beyond her wrinkled reflection. She was making sure a pair of arms weren't hiding within, ready to grab her around the ankles and yank her under.

The bottom wasn't more than three feet beneath the surface. She entered slowly, feeling goose-bumps scatter up her body as her skin touched the water. A moment later, she took a deep breath, clenched her eyes and dunked herself under. She came up, shaking the water off of her face, then grabbed for her soap. As the other girls playfully splashed each other, she scrubbed her inner thighs and vaginal area until the palm-sized ivory bar wore to nothing.

Suddenly, an awful thought struck her, and she could feel her head shrink as the possibility settled in.

If it happened, it wouldn't have been the first time that she got pregnant.

Oh God, what have I done with myself? she thought, triggering another shot of grief through her head.

But this time it wasn't her fault. The women at the *1 in 4* seminar said that rape was never a woman's fault. And if the rape wasn't her fault, she wouldn't have to bear responsibility for the child.

How bout the first one, then? she could hear her father yelling if he ever found out about it.

"Oh my god."

"Deanna, are you all right?" Meg asked from the edge of the water next to Steve.

"Yeah," Deanna said without thinking.

You're irresponsible! her father screamed, his face bright red. *I told you a million times about this but you just want to learn the hard way, don't you? Keep it up, young lady, so you can see how much worse your life can get.*

Even if the rape wasn't her fault, it wouldn't have happened

if...

...

"Hey, I'm Brendan."

They stood on the airport runway while the campers and counselors loaded their bags into the plane. Deanna noticed his deep blue eyes, like oval sapphires staring her down.

"Hi," she blushed. *Oh my god he's gorgeous.* He looked much better than Curtis, her ex-boyfriend of two years. She had a hard time looking anywhere but his eyes, but she could see his black hair slicking over his ears, hanging like even curtains in the back.

"You gonna shake my hand?" He smiled.

"Oh!" She peered down and saw his outreached fingers. She blushed as she shook limply.

"You seem nervous. Haven't you met anyone new before?" he asked, then started laughing.

Deanna laughed, too, and couldn't stop. *Not anyone this handsome,* she wanted to say but hadn't the courage. Even while cracking up, the two continued eyeing each other.

They caught their breath a moment later. "I'm Deanna," she finally said.

"Where you from?"

"San Diego."

"Hey, me too!"

A few other people approached and introduced themselves. Deanna and Brendan broke away to chat with the fellow campers, but every couple of minutes they'd catch each other glancing back.

The two sat together on the plane and spent several hours talking about school, music, movies, and whatever else came to mind.

Brendan was simply the most handsome guy she had ever seen, and she knew *he liked her too*. They went to different schools, but lived only 10 miles from each other. Deanna had broken up with Curtis a few months before and wasn't dating anyone else. She'd get to spend an entire week with this guy.

An awkward moment came later that afternoon, after the plane landed. Everyone had to choose a spot to build their shelter, and the boys and girls separated to their own sides. No matter. They both knew they'd be hanging out enough and didn't need their shelters nearby to make the most of their time together.

Johnny handed out tenfoot ropes to every third camper.

"That's all you get between the three of you on this trip," he said.

At first the campers wondered how they could possibly make a shelter with one rope to share between the three of them. Brendan had the idea to unstring the main intertwined parts into three.

Everyone also received a 8-by-8 foot tarp - all from Johnny's store, of course. A few campers folded them in half, wrapped pebbles in the creases and knotted the rope around each end. Then they tied both sides to adjacent trees, forming drop tents joined at the rope.

Other campers shoved stakes into the ground and propped up the tarps with long sticks, which held them over their sleeping bags. They lined rocks on the edges so it wouldn't flap around in the wind.

"Wanna go for a walk?" Brendan asked Deanna later that afternoon. The counselors were busy building their own shelters and the other campers began playing Frisbee.

"Sure," she said without second thought.

Deanna didn't know why, but Brendan led her into the woods. She remembered thinking that the beach would have been a nicer place to go, but they quickly fell into conversation again and

she forgot all about it.

Those woods... If we'd only gone to the beach none of this would have happened. Why the woods? Why in the hell would he want to go there? Why did I follow?

She glanced back into the forest, around the trees, seeing her rapist sprinting, then diving into the water to take her again.

Again, she screamed.

...

"This reminds me of 'Lord of the Flies,'" Shawn said. He and Billy rested on sleeping bags underneath a tarp propped up by branches on one side and held down by rocks on the other. "Three aces."

"Well, sort of," Billy replied, tossing his cards face-down. "The only thing in common is being stranded on the island. 'Lord of the Flies' was about the fall of a society into savagery."

A pause, then he continued.

"Maybe a few more days of this and we'll be dancing around in loincloths and killing Piggy."

"What do you wanna do?" Shawn asked, grabbing the cards and shuffling.

"We could go into the woods," Billy said. "Look to see where that murderer lived."

"What if someone's still out there?"

"Steve and Johnny didn't find anything and they were gone a couple hours. And when they came back, you didn't see them bunch us up together and stand guard, did you?"

Shawn hesitated. "You sure?"

"Think about it," Billy said, dealing the cards. "Whoever was out there hijacked the plane and took off, stranding us here. It was probably some crazy shipwrecked hermit who freaked out when Brendan and Deanna went out there to screw each other."

Shawn picked up the cards. His highest was a queen, no potential for a straight or flush.

"You don't wanna hang around here the rest of the day, do you?" Billy said. "We won't go far. We'll just see what's out there. We'll pretend we're getting firewood."

"Sure, what the hell."

3

After Steve kicked him out of the firewood group for not working hard enough, David walked toward the ocean where Johnny's group was fishing, then cut away and headed northwest along the

beach. He knew they'd miss him eventually, but he also knew the counselors didn't have many options for punishing him. All they could do - when they got rescued - was inform his parents of his misbehavior and bar him from coming back to that camp.

As if this camp will be around any longer, anyway, he thought.

To David, that would be a good thing. He had to make his parents understand that he didn't want to do everything they pushed him into, like summer camp, the National Honors Society, or the Science Club.

It's not that David didn't like camping and hiking, he didn't like the people he was with. The moment he met the others at the airport, he knew he wouldn't befriend any of them. Brendan was too busy picking up on Deanna, who didn't introduce herself either. He tried saying hi to Billy and Shawn, but they were snickering at the obese lady who ran the camp's registration.

Just a bunch of assholes, he thought, but knew he'd have to suffer through only a week with them before going home. It was certainly better than going through four years of high school with the same jerks.

That guy Brendan... *he had it coming,* David thought. He

hated guys like that. Like Rusty, too. Yet, girls flocked to them. That was actually the worst part. Guys like that goofed on him, pushed him in the halls, and went out of their way to crush him at every sport in gym class. Oftentimes, David thought about sticking sulfuric acid or some other substance from chemistry class in their lunches. He didn't want to become one of those *shoot em all wackos*. Those kids gave all vengeance-seekers a bad name. He wanted to do something only to those who hurt him - only to those who deserved it - and he'd be the underground hero.

But this time, justice - severe as it was - served itself. Certainly Brendan wasn't worth killing - but the most humbling event possible short of public castration would have done just fine. Still, he had it coming.

And Deanna... *she wants to spread herself to these I'm-too-cool-for-you hooligans the first day they meet*, rape was the perfect punishment. *That'll scare her straight*, he thought.

Now only if a similar fate could come to every athlete, cocky asshole, and slut in high school...

But David didn't have to worry about high school then. He had the rest of the summer before he had to worry about that virtual prison. After camp, he planned on spending his time

downloading movies and music - his parents got him a cable modem - and playing Dungeons & Dragons with a few of the guys down the street. He'd also continue attending Chinese school once a week, another thing his parents made him do. Then, in August, his parents would bring him to Taiwan for the third time. They would spend a month there, visiting relatives.

Wearing his hiking boots, David formed tracks close enough to the tide so it would wash over his trail. Steve was going to yell at him whether he stayed at the camp or took off on his own, so he at least wanted to make it difficult for anyone to find him.

With the breeze to his face, David could smell a strong, fragrant odor mixed with the sandy and salty beach air. It reminded him of the time he sniffed liquid detergent in the laundry room. He paused, shaking off the rush in his head, then continued.

Clouds passed through the sunlight as it started its decent for the evening. A seagull stuck its head into the ocean and pulled out a fish, then flew toward the shore. The land ahead curved to the left, and he knew he had a ways to go before making a complete circle around the island.

The detergent-like odor swished through his nose again. He looked ahead, expecting to see a super-sized, uncapped container of laundry fluid with waves rushing around the base. But there was only sand, the ocean, the horizon, and trees along the edges of the beach.

Something caught his eye on one of the branches. A red-bellied bird walked across a limb, shaking its head back and forth, struggling with something in its beak. It chomped a few times before part of the meal fell to the ground. The bird raised its head and swallowed the rest, then floated down to retrieve what it lost. Another bird came from nowhere and grabbed the dropped piece and flew into the woods. The red-bellied bird squawked and pursued the thief, and David could see no more.

Glancing down, he saw his boots swaying from side to side, but he wasn't walking. The odor suddenly hit him again. He lifted his head, closed his eyes and inhaled, shivering.

Then he heard a steady hum, followed by a different octave, then another. Soft tones played, and they were close. Not in the woods, not far ahead, but right behind him.

Reaching into his pocket for his knife, he wrapped his fingers around the handle and stuck the nail of his thumb under

the knob, ready to pull it out and flip it open.

He spun around.

There was a girl walking toward him, holding a flute horizontally to her young, rounded face, lips blowing gently. Her straight brunette hair hung to her waist, and she wore a skirt of braided grass that dangled to her knees. A lei of yellow flowers barely covered her apple-sized breasts.

A trap, David thought.

He looked into the woods, but saw nobody. He looked behind him, but the beach was empty.

He looked back at her. She stopped playing the flute and flashed him a warm, full-lipped smile, waving her hand like an old friend as she followed his footprints in the dampened sand.

David finally took his hand out of his pocket - without the knife. She approached him, placing her palm on the center of her chest, between her bare breasts and lei.

"Valsa," she said.

"Velsa," David replied, getting a whiff of the floral perfume that undoubtedly came from her lei.

He still couldn't tell if she was a decoy and the snare was about to snap shut around his ankles. He looked around. Nobody in

the trees. Nobody behind the bushes. Certainly nobody in the ocean.

She frowned and said, "Valsa," putting the stress on the first a, then smiled again.

"Valsa," David said, relieved that she had a sense of humor. "David."

"Dah-veed," she attempted. Though she mispronounced it, David liked the way she spoke. He didn't care what she called him, anyway, nor did it make any difference.

Valsa reached for a small leather pouch attached to the woven belt that held up her skirt. With the flute clasped under her arm, she emptied the contents into her palm.

Blueberries. She took a couple and ate them, then offered some to David. He accepted, feeling her hand graze against his as the berries transferred. He took a bite. They tasted far better than the ones he had picked near the camp.

David pointed to her flute, and she handed it to him. He examined it, seeing that it was just a hollowed-out stick with several holes, clogged with hardened mud in the ends. He blew in, and a soft, sluggish tone eased out. *Not bad*, he thought, and began playing 'Yankee Doodle.'

A look of astonishment and amazement crossed her face as she heard the music. Three years of piccolo lessons in elementary school were finally paying off. Perhaps his parents were right to push him into certain activities.

When he finished the song, he tried handing her back the flute, but she denied.

'You may keep it,' she said, and he understood.

4

Billy and Shawn walked to the beach, then cut back into the woods, constantly turning their heads to make sure nobody was watching.

"I mean, if they just quarantine all the people with AIDS, it won't be a problem anymore. Think about it. Put them in colonies, let them do whatever they want there - drugs, sex, rock and roll - and the rest of the world won't have to worry! It worked with leprosy - no one has that anymore."

"Yeah, but how are they gonna be able to get everyone who has AIDS?" Shawn asked.

"Like this," Billy said. "First, get all the gays by saying there's a march. All they ever do is march. Then, get all the needle-sharing junkies by giving away Afghan-made heroin. Even

people without AIDS would wanna go there."

Shawn laughed. "I think this place already exists - Los Angeles."

"Hey, look!" Billy pointed to the ground in front of them. A thick, shiny, yellow and black snake slowly inched its way through the woods no more than five feet from them.

"Looks like a python," Shawn said, remembering the time when an animal expert visited his middle school. "It'll leave us alone."

They hesitated a minute after the tail slithered into the green, then continued, looking around for others.

They didn't walk along a designated path, just between the bushes and trees that grew closer together than the ones on the edge of the forest. The further they walked, the more they had to swat away the swarms of bugs that circled their heads. The sun beat down on them between the leaves, squeezing out droplets of sweat from their brows.

"You smell something?" Shawn asked. He stopped walking and shut his eyes for a moment.

Billy sniffed the air. "Uh, not really."

Shawn shook his head as if trying to get something out of

his hair.

"You okay, man?" Billy asked.

"Yeah, just had a head rush." Shawn said.

"Premature ejaculation?"

"No. Shut up."

They continued walking.

"What if the plane comes back while we're out here?" Shawn asked.

"We'll hear it and we'll run back. They're not gonna leave without us. I mean, so what if we get in trouble for sneaking away? They're in deep enough shit as it is."

A few branches cracked behind them.

Shawn spun around, seeing only the woods.

Billy turned his head, catching movement on one of the treetops.

Perched on a branch by the trunk, a bare-chested woman in a grass skirt held a spear in her right hand, cocked and ready to throw.

"Run!" Billy screamed and sprinted away from her. Shawn followed, just as she began hollering.

Billy suddenly rotated in the direction of the campsite, but

Shawn had his head turned - still looking for her in the trees - and they crashed into each other.

The moment he hit the ground, Billy got up but didn't take two steps before something hit his legs and sent him falling again. The landing shaved the skin off of his knees, hands and chin. As he scurried to his feet, someone pounced on him, slamming his face back to the earth. He felt what seemed to be water balloons shoved against his back as a pair of tan, hairless arms bear-hugged him.

"Ahhhhh!" Billy screeched as a woman flipped him to his front while straddling his mid-section. He yanked his hands loose, shot them forward, aiming for her neck but instead grabbed a handful of her cantaloupe-sized breasts. He clawed his fingernails into the soft flesh before she swiped his hands away and pinned them to the ground.

From behind, Shawn locked his forearm around her neck and tried jerking her away, but she bent forward and flipped him over her back. Billy and Shawn felt an awful clunk as their heads collided, flashing starry blackness before their eyes.

As their vision returned, they saw the woman staring down on them, knees grinding into their stomachs while she stiff-armed

their jaws. An army of topless tribal women in grass skirts surrounded them, laughing.

Billy and Shawn kicked and punched, hitting nothing. The brutish woman lifted her knee and jammed it into Billy's solar plexus, then Shawn's. The boys curled up, gasping for air.

The native women started chanting, '*Veema! Veema! Veema!*' They laughed harder, and some even sat cross-legged and watched like spectators at a wrestling match. The brutal woman flipped the boys back over to their stomachs and squashed their backsides under her knees, holding their faces in the dirt. Someone in the crowd tossed her a ball of twine, and she began binding each of their wrists together behind their backs. Shawn tensed his muscles, hoping slack would form when he relaxed, but the rope felt like razor wire cutting through his skin.

Billy didn't realize what was going on until his hands were tied and someone pulled him to his feet. Then he felt a chill. He looked down and saw his shorts around his ankles and a woman cutting the laces off of his boots with a metal knife. The crowd burst into laughter while looking at his crotch.

He kicked his right leg into the face of the kneeling woman, sending her staggering backward. She held her bleeding nose and

stared at him, undoubtedly cursing. A few women began comforting her, hissing at the boy at the same time.

Two women dragged over a pair of thick, wooden poles, shaved of the bark, as others tore off Shawn's clothing like they were stripping an old doll. Shawn had stopped struggling as he found it did not good. Four women lined Billy's back against the pole as he kicked his legs and thrust his hips.

During the next few minutes, the women fastened the boys at the ankles, waists, and upper torsos, securing their hands behind the poles. Billy's throat became raspy from screaming, but he continued anyway as he felt each tug of the twine cut into his skin.

Suddenly, their bodies jerked upward and they felt their weight sink further into the rope. Hovering three feet from the ground, they could see the heels of the women in front of them, marching.

"Put me down!" Billy screamed, feeling like cargo as the wooded ground moved beneath him. He lifted his head, but could only see muscular legs sticking out of the grass skirts, stepping back and forth.

The women continued talking, but the laughter had ceased.

Voices began to rise, particularly from the women holding the pole by Shawn's feet. A moment later, she was yelling. They came to a sudden stop, and he remained in mid-air. The loud-voiced woman had the final word, barking commands before they proceeded.

A few moments passed, and hardly anyone spoke. The loud-voiced woman had her say. She was their leader, and Shawn knew that whatever she decided would be their fate.

Both boys saw themselves crossing a threshold as the ground changed from wooded to hard dirt.

Another minute passed and the women came to a sudden stop. Shawn's feet hit the ground first as the loud-voiced woman dropped the pole, but the woman on the other side placed him down gently.

Seconds later, Shawn felt himself rising head-first. He saw a long-legged woman pushing up the top of the pole while at least two others guided him from behind. His back slid along the wood and his knees folded as they hit the dusty ground.

Next to him, Billy went up the same way. He, too, slid down and sat on the dirt, leaning against the pole.

At least we're not over the fire, Shawn thought, catching a whiff of the herbal air that put his head in a floating daze. He

knew he'd have to kill someone to get out of this mess, if only he could get the knots loose. He tried wiggling his hands around but they wouldn't budge. The only good thing was that he finally got a clearer view of his captors. They looked to be a mix between the Native Americans he saw in books - the ones living in tepees and wearing feathered headdresses and buffalo skin - and East Asians. Though beautiful, they had a rugged look to them, muscles from manual labor, calluses curling over the sides of their feet, bare chests with large breasts, long braided hair, silky jet. Some of them wore shawls over their heads.

"Billy?" Shawn asked. "Billy!" A fresh round of tears poured from his eyes, blurring the view of the women's breasts.

5

All day, Johnny kept an eye on the campers as best as he could, but it never occurred to him that anyone would sneak away again. He began to have his suspicions the moment he returned from the beach. He hadn't seen Billy or Shawn in some time, and Steve and Meg's group had already come back from the water hole. Those boys were certainly troublesome, but they weren't stupid, he thought. *Maybe they wandered back to the beach.*

Suzzie walked up to him while he was sitting by the fire.

"When are we gonna get rescued?" she asked, more annoyed than worried, like a child asking her parents when they were going to leave a bank so they could go to McDonald's and get a Happy Meal.

"I wish I could tell you. Don't worry, you're safe with me." The counselor patted her on the shoulder. "Go eat some berries. We've got plenty of them, so fill up."

"Okay," she said with an indifferent smile, then walked away. Johnny looked at her and thought of his own children, thanking Jesus they weren't there with him. If they were, he'd make sure they wouldn't leave his sight for even a moment. Then again, his kids wouldn't have wandered away, tribal people or no tribal people.

Overall, though, the campers were taking the situation pretty well. *A little too well*, he thought, watching them play in the field.

...

"*Five hundred!*" Jason yelled and launched the Frisbee. A group of boys bunched together, jumping at the same time. A few hands grabbed onto the disc before several of them fell to the ground. The girls stood by, laughing.

Rusty jumped up. "Got it! What, does this mean I win or something?"

"Yeah, it's your turn to throw," Jason said. "Haven't you ever played 500 before?"

"Nope, and I think I've had my fill." Rusty flung the Frisbee to one of the younger campers before walking to the fire to meet Johnny, Meg and Steve. The counselors fed branches and leaves into the blaze. A black smokescreen steamed from the woodpile.

"We're missing three. Billy, Shawn and David," Meg said drearily as Steve paced back and forth, hands on his hips.

"You think they went out together?" Johnny asked.

"I doubt it," Rusty said. "I thought I saw Billy and Shawn head back toward the beach a few hours ago. And David's a loner - he wouldn't have gone with them."

"I might have seen them out there, but they weren't fishing with us. We better look for them," Johnny said.

"How the hell did it happen in the first place? Why were we stupid enough to let them out of our sight?" Steve stopped, then began pacing again.

"Keep your voice down," Johnny said. "We should've been

looking after them better."

The campers turned their heads, catching an earful before running to catch the Frisbee again.

"So, do we go looking for them or don't we?" Rusty asked.

"No one is going anywhere," Steve said. "I don't want anyone even going to take a piss without one of the counselors holding their hand."

Johnny snapped a branch and tossed it into the fire. "All right. You're right. We can't risk going out there. Now who's gonna break the news to the campers that three more are missing and we're not gonna go looking for them?"

"That's my responsibility," Steve said.

"You already told them that there's no one else on the island." Johnny kept his voice to a near-whisper. "What does anyone have to be afraid of if they think we're here alone?"

"Well, Johnny, I didn't think anyone would be stupid enough to wander away."

"You're the boss, Steve." Johnny got up and walked over to the campers, joining them in their game. Steve headed across the camp to his shelter.

"Throw it here!" Johnny yelled. The camper twirled the

Frisbee a few feet over Johnny's head. He jumped up, reaching with both hands, revealing his belly from beneath his stained blue shirt.

"Smear the queer!" one of the campers yelled. The counselors looked on, laughing as the boys bombarded the nature guide.

"Smear the queer?" Rusty said while watching Johnny playfully defend himself from the attacking campers. "If there's anyone on this planet who isn't queer, it's Johnny. The whole world could go gay, but he'd be the only one left. The funny thing is, he'd be completely oblivious to it."

Meg started laughing. "Even you?"

"Nah, I prefer not to swing that way, Meg. Not if I don't see another girl in my life. And I've seen more than most people my age."

"What are you, 18?" Meg asked with a broad grin.

"Yeah. The first time I went all the way was at 13."

"I have to admit, Rusty, when I first met you I thought you were full of shit when it came to women," she said.

"Why?"

"Because, I don't know," she laughed.

"Well, I'll tell you what. Once I got off the dope I've only

been with Kelly."

"Good for you," Meg said as Johnny came walking over, ringing the sweat out of his shirt.

"You're sweating already? You caught the Frisbee once!" Rusty started laughing.

"Awe, shut up, I've been sweating all day from the sun." Johnny took deep breaths as if he had just hiked several miles through the desert.

"Hey, what are we gonna do for dinner?" Rusty asked, looking at his watch. It was 6 p.m.

"I think we should try hunting one of those boars." Johnny looked toward the woods, still wondering exactly how those pigs got to the island.

"I used to go hunting all the time," Meg said.

"For boars?" Rusty asked.

"Quail." She blushed.

Rusty and Johnny laughed as Steve walked from his shelter and rejoined the counselors by the fire.

"Hey, we were just talking about going out to catch an animal," Johnny said. "We can either set traps or hunt."

"Hunt with what?" Rusty asked.

"I wish I brought my shotgun," Meg said, taking aim at the woods and pulling an invisible trigger with her index finger. "I had the most accurate shot back in summer camp."

"Does anyone think they're fast enough to catch a boar and jam a knife in the back of its neck?" Johnny unsheathed his eight-inch blade and rolled the handle in the palm of his hand.

Steve didn't say anything. He just stared at the ground.

"I don't think I can bring myself to do that," Rusty said. "I'm a lover, not a fighter. I mean, sure, I eat meat, but, you know, I don't wanna kill anything. Just grill it, broil it, fry it..."

"I don't have much experience setting snares," Johnny said. The closest he ever came to dealing with traps was looking out for landmines.

"I do," Steve finally spoke, but continued staring at the ground.

"Steve, you okay?" Meg noticed that he was unusually somber, which was far more pleasant than the way he normally acted.

"Yeah," he said, looking up. "We'll go set a couple of traps out there. Meg, come with me. Johnny, stay back and don't let a kid anywhere near those woods."

"Yes sir," Johnny said, turning toward the campers, who continued playing Frisbee.

...

He stared at Deanna, who had been lying in the tent since coming back from the water hole that afternoon. Her eyes were open and blinking but she responded to no one. Her face was chalk-white with a few freckles, chilled with goose bumps. Her heart beat steadily, one pump a second, unchanging over the course of hours.

"We'll be all right, Deanna," Steve whispered, his lips by the camper's left pierced ear, the jewel missing. "We've got all the stuff we need until someone rescues us."

One boy dead, one camper raped, three boys missing, transportation stolen... savage bitches out in the woods. If George is alive, he'll get help.

No, he can't cause he's dead he's dead he's dead he's dead he's dead he's dead he's dead oh god he's fucking dead! We're trapped on this fucking island and we're gonna die all because of you George you worthless bastard!

"Jesus, let rescue come soon," he whispered, wishing he could scream. And then another voice in the back of his head

reminded him of the worst part. *No one's gonna find us. We're on the wrong island.*

6

Rippling waves rushed over the sand as a breeze shifted the ferns along the coastline. Seagulls planted their eggs on the beach before the approaching thunderous noise sent them fleeing. Four helicopters flew inland.

"Dispatch, this is rescue mission Pacific. So far there ain't no sign of the scout group. We'll circle the island, and if they don't turn up, we're gonna have to land and try to figure out what to do next. Over."

After the choppers circled the island - which took a couple minutes - they landed, swirling the beach's sand all around like a windstorm in the desert. The pilots cut the motors and exited, covering their eyes and ducking while running for the clearing.

"They can't be here. This must be the wrong island."

"We're on the right coordinates."

"Where in the hell else would they be?"

7

Valsa grabbed David by the arm and hurried him into the woods. He kept his hand in his pocket, clenching the knife, ready

to pull it out and stick it to the beauty's throat the moment her accomplice tried catching him by surprise. One of her people already killed one of his, so this could be an opportunity for revenge. The flute she had given him rested in the back pocket of his shorts.

Her quick glances in every direction both relaxed and concerned him. Perhaps she really wasn't trying to lead him to his death. She was like the farmer's daughter, pulling aside the traveling salesman for a romp in the barn while her daddy was busy hacking the heads off the chickens.

Or, perhaps those nervous glances meant she was looking for her partner in crime, who had fallen asleep when he was supposed to jump from the bushes and jam a spear into David's back. She had gone out of her way to befriend him, then lure him into the woods before having him killed. She was trying to earn her merit badge for seduction. Primitive tribes didn't ambush misguided foreigners - they charmed their captors with sweet-talk before sacrificing them in the volcano.

When they entered the woods, Valsa ducked and motioned for David to do the same. They walked with their backs to the sky for a minute before they came upon trees that resembled giant bushes.

Leaves the size of paper towels hung vertically, overlapping like tiles on a roof. Valsa squatted and pushed some aside, revealing an opening to crawl through. She got on her hands and knees and scooted inside, then motioned for him.

David crouched and peered in, but couldn't tell if someone was hiding on the other side, ready to bonk him over the head with a jagged club. Her precious throat was no longer in his cutting range.

But he couldn't stop. He couldn't just turn around and run. No way. His heart was thumping hard but he loved every minute of it. This was his only chance at something like this. Also, why would she drag him all the way out there just to knock him over the head? She wouldn't base her entire plan - and risk her merit badge - on his decision to cross a leafy threshold.

David dropped to his knees and scrambled through. Along the way he saw snapped branches on either side of him. Someone, most likely Valsa, had made the passage long ago. He crawled about ten feet and immediately stood when he got to the clearing.

The large-leafed trees completely surround them. With the sky above and the sun shining at an angle, he felt like he was at the bottom of a thirty-foot well. Brown sand covered the ground,

a bit thicker and darker than the kind on the beach.

Valsa sat with her legs crossed and motioned for him to sit with her. He sat on his knees, knowing that would be a better position to be in if he needed to spring up and flee.

Now what? David thought. *What in the hell are we gonna do now?*

Using her finger, Valsa drew a picture in the sand. She pointed to it, then to herself. Then she drew two more. One of them had two small lines sticking out of the chest, and the other had a line between the legs, pointing at a 45-degree angle at the other figure.

David blushed, but this seemed normal to her. Everywhere else - at least on bathroom doors - a triangular skirt designated a woman and the one without a skirt was the man. She cut right to the point.

The man she called Toriche, the woman, Torana.

"Torana," David repeated. These were probably her parents.

Next, she drew another man - the line between his legs pointing at her. '*Ithariche.*'

Wait a minute. She's married, David thought. *What the hell? What's she doing hitting on me?*

Valsa drew an X over Ithariche. *'Ithariche is dead,'* she said with her eyes closed. David thought for a moment before making the connection. She pointed to the drawing, then to the sky. She stood, arms spread, still looking upward, as if flying.

Ithariche was on the plane, David thought. *But that doesn't mean he's dead. And how many of them got on the plane? How many are still here? Was Ithariche the one who killed Brendan?*

If Steve said they didn't find anyone when he and Johnny went into the woods that morning, then maybe the natives were hiding. Surely Valsa wasn't the only one left. Of course she wasn't, otherwise she wouldn't have been so careful when bringing him to her hiding place.

Should I go back and warn everyone? he wondered.

Warn them about what? Valsa wasn't a savage. She was a young, adventurous woman who didn't want to miss out on the opportunity to converse with a foreigner. Maybe she was the only one like that and the others were savages. Maybe the campers were getting rampaged right then while he was hanging out with his new girlfriend.

But if Steve and Johnny could go way out into the woods that morning without seeing anyone, maybe the remaining natives hid

and didn't want to be bothered, and Valsa was the only exception.

Maybe I should bring Valsa back to the camp, David thought.

Then Steve would scream at him for leaving and scare her away.

Screw it, he thought. *I'm staying here.*

8

Steve left the tent with some rope around his shoulder. Meg was waiting outside.

"You sure you're all right?" she asked. She overheard him speaking to Deanna, though the camper wasn't responding to anyone.

"Yeah," he said hoarsely, running his fingers over the slimy eyes of the fish heads in the plastic bag.

The two counselors walked past the campers toward the woods. Someone tossed the Frisbee to Steve, who caught it with his free hand.

"Where you going?" Jason asked.

"To kill you some dinner," Steve said, then threw the Frisbee back. The campers didn't think twice about it and continued playing.

"They seem a little too happy, don't you think?" Meg asked as they stepped into the forest.

"Good," Steve replied. "Of course, if they were scared shitless like they should be, we wouldn't be missing those three."

"Maybe we should've told them about those women."

"No, that would only make them worry more. I just can't believe those guys ran off like that."

"Do you think they're..." Meg couldn't finish.

"I hate to say it, but yeah, I think those women would've killed them already. They were trying to kill me and Johnny."

Bushes started shaking not far ahead and Meg stopped. An animal scurried through the brush, no more than 20 feet away.

"Jeez, that almost gave me a heart attack," Meg said.

"Shouldn't we just chase after it?"

"Let's try a trap first."

"What kind? A snare? Deadfall?" Meg asked, remembering that chapter in one of her survival books back at her apartment.

"Snare, and if that doesn't work, we'll go to plan B."

"What's plan B?" Meg asked.

"I'll tell you only if the snare doesn't work."

They walked another 100 feet into the woods, hearing several animals scampering around, looking for dinner themselves.

"Stop here," Steve said, seeing a 10-foot high, stick-in-the-ground tree that had lost all its branches. He licked his finger and stuck it in the air. No breeze.

He grabbed the top of a tree and pulled it down in an arch, then let go. It sprang into the air, whipping back and forth a couple of times.

"This'll do," he said. "Find me a wishbone-shaped branch, about a foot long."

Meg looked around while Steve untwined the rope.

Suddenly, a small brown pig came running out of the bushes, squealing. It scrambled quickly and turned around as if it had made a wrong turn. Steve and Meg froze for a split second before it disappeared from view, rustling the bushes as it fled.

"Damn, I should've jumped on it!" Meg said as she snapped the ends of a branch.

"That thing would've dragged you to the other side of the island!"

"I would've jammed my knife in its neck, Steve."

"You're one vicious chick," Steve said with a rare smirk.

"Well," Meg's smile faded away. "I wouldn't do something like that just for the hell of it."

Their eyes met for a moment. Then he saw the branch she was holding. "Okay, take your knife and sharpen the two long ends... just sharp enough so we can stick it in the ground."

While Meg shaved the ends of the branch with the blade of her Leatherman tool, Steve searched for a few smaller sticks.

"This trap is actually best for catching rabbits," he said while snapping a stick to the size of a pencil. He made a lasso with the rope, then tied the pencil-sized twig to it about a foot below the knot of the noose. Then, he took another stick of the same size and stuck the fish's head onto the end of it. "It tightens around its neck and flings it into the air. But back in the scouts we got a raccoon with it. Trapped its leg."

"Is this good enough?" Meg asked, holding her Y-shaped branch.

"Yeah, that'll do," Steve said, then jammed the two sharpened ends into the ground. Next, he tied the opposite end of the rope to the tree and pulled it down into an arch again. He placed the baited stick against the reverse Y-shaped branch, then held it in place in a cross with the twig that he had tied to the rope. He spread the noose on the ground beneath the bait.

"All right. Now all we gotta do is wait for an animal to

stroll along, and hope it likes fish."

The counselors walked about 100 feet from the trap, hearing branches cracking and leaves rusting nearby. Steve kept looking out for native women, but didn't think they would be making so much noise. If they came, it would be silently, and he knew he'd have a spear or an arrow in his chest before he even saw them.

Steve sat on a log, and Meg sat next to him, leaning against his shoulder. They had their backs to the campsite.

"It's good to get away from the kids," Meg said, looking at her watch. 6:45 p.m.

"I'm gonna go looking for the missing guys tonight," Steve said.

"What?" Meg abruptly sat up.

"I've got to. There's still a chance they're alive. I've gotta go make sure."

"Then why wait?"

Steve spoke calmly. "If the women are going to kill them, they'd be dead already. Johnny and I noticed there seemed to be a bit of a power struggle going on. A few of the women were arguing. They're in a transition period because all the men left. If I leave tonight, when most of them are sleeping, I stand a

better chance of seeing if the boys are just being held captive. Then, I'll do everything I can to free them. But the shit we saw out there - dead men with poles through the length of their bodies - I really don't think those boys are still alive."

"Oh my god..." Meg said, not wanting to believe what Steve had told her, praying he was kidding. He held her.

"Just don't tell anyone," Steve said. "I don't want Johnny to know I'm going out there. He'll be sleeping when I leave. And trust me, I'll be safe. I guarantee that."

Meg buried her head into his shoulder. Steve kissed her hair. The sky dimmed. Crickets chirped. They could barely hear the teens playing, running around, making the best of their trip. A breeze rushed through the air, chilling their skin for a moment.

Something snapped in the distance, followed by squeals of pain.

They jumped up and ran over to the trap. The desperate, high-pitched noises grew louder as they saw a baby boar - about the size of a large chicken - hanging by the front-legs from the bending tree, its head quaking back and forth and its snout twitching.

"Turn your head, I don't want you to see this." Steve pulled out his knife from the sheath on his waist.

Meg watched anyway as he slit the throat of the squealing piglet and held him by the hind legs. The noise stopped and blood flowed out like paint.

"This looks good," Steve said, wrapping the rope around its torso with his reddened hands.

"Listen," Meg said with tears in her eyes. "I want you to be careful tonight. I won't tell anyone, I promise. I just want you to come back alive."

"I will," Steve said with the confidence of a star athlete preparing to beat the same opponent for the fourth time. They walked back to the campsite, the boar hanging from the rope over his shoulder, dripping blood.

9

Valsa had cleared the dirt and handed the stick to David. Just as she had, he drew his family.

"David," he pointed to the picture and then back to himself. "Bob, Sally." His parents rarely went by their Chinese names. He drew several other people attached to them, making sure to include the two-lined breasts for the women and squiggly penises

for the men, directed at their wives. He knew a few of his aunts and uncles but had only met them a few times because they lived in Taiwan and weren't close to his parents. David didn't even remember all of their names, so he made them up since Valsa wouldn't know the difference.

As he pointed out a few more relatives, his stomach suddenly growled. Valsa giggled and pointed to his belly.

'Hungry?' She pretended to chomp on her fingers.

David nodded his head.

She smiled, then pointed to the exit and pretended to chomp on her fingers again.

'David, wait here,' she said while heading for the exit of the hiding place. David began to follow her, but she turned and held up her palm. Then she grabbed his shoulders and rubbed her nose against his. David shivered as their skin touched. Backing off, Valsa pointed to him and then to the ground.

'I will return with food,' she said, again pretending to chomp on her fingers. A disturbed look crossed David's face.

She grabbed his hand, squeezed it, then turned and crawled through the exit, leaving David behind.

Oh god, what the hell am I doing? he thought. *She'll come*

back. She better. Oh god she better.

He sat back down on his knees, not sure what to do. He pulled the flute out of his pocket but knew better than to play it. Obviously, there were other natives lurking around those woods who wouldn't look too kindly on Valsa if they found out her little secret. He grabbed the knife from his pocket and held it in his palm, but didn't flip the blade because the sun could reflect off of it and give away his hiding place. There was nothing left to do but wait for her, plain and simple.

Or, he could return to the camp. He'd have to run. Then, when he got back, Steve would scream at him. But, he could at least warn everyone that there were more natives out there.

Then he thought back to Johnny and Steve's mission that morning. *How didn't they find anyone?* he wondered. *Did Steve lie to keep us from panicking?* Had Steve said he spied upon - or even ran into - a bunch of natives, David wouldn't have ever gone walking by himself.

Yet, the moment he saw Valsa, he couldn't bring himself to run away. She approached him so peacefully, as if she knew she'd have to introduce herself in such a manner or risk having him flee. She knew he'd be scared - or at least she knew most people

would be.

But now what? he thought. Is she gonna come back?

She hadn't spent the early evening with him, drawing family portraits, only to ditch him. This was the beginning of something wonderful.

Of what?

Valsa will return with me to America, I'll teach her English, she'll go to school, we'll have sex all the time, marry, have kids, and live happily ever after.

There was no way she would want to leave her home. He would certainly ask, but he couldn't expect her to say yes. And even if she agreed to come with him, there was no way Steve would allow her on the plane, helicopter, boat, or whatever form of transportation came to rescue them. And even if Steve did let her come back to America, David's parents certainly wouldn't take her in.

Maybe he could stay there on the island, and she could teach him her language. There was something strangely familiar about the words that Valsa had been using. He didn't remember exactly what she said, but the more he thought about it, the more he realized that it sounded like an Asian dialect. He spoke Chinese

fluently enough to carry on a conversation, and he recognized when someone was speaking Korean, Japanese, Cantonese or Vietnamese. She wasn't speaking any of those, but she was definitely speaking something related. David wondered if her writing consisted of complex symbols drawn in calligraphy. Perhaps he could find out when she returned.

If she returned.

Oh god she better.

...

Shanta sat on the tree branch about two body-lengths in the air, her spine to the trunk and her legs dangling from either side. It was the same tree that she had played in as a child. Only this time she wasn't playing - she was looking out for more pale men - young or old - who wanted to rape the Tore women and massacre the village. If she saw any, she'd scream to the other guards, who were stationed at every corner, and attempt to kill at least one of the intruders by tossing a spear.

This worried her because she had snapped her elbow the night before while tussling with Credarain, and trying to launch the weapon, even with her good arm, would surely send her falling from the branch.

Veema, having already learned her lesson that day about the importance of having security on duty at all times and in all places, needed all guards she could get. She stationed Shanta on the side of the village where the nearest star sets - the least likely place the pale men would go. Using her one arm and both legs, Shanta climbed the braided twine to the top, and Lusha tossed the weapon up to her.

That hadn't been the first time Credarain had seriously injured her. He had done it twice before - once during the full moon feast when they first embraced, and again revolutions later when he grew frustrated that she hadn't gotten pregnant. Then, he scrapped her head so badly that her hair wouldn't grow back over the scar. She had covered it with a shawl ever since.

Torana had always been there to heal her wounds, whether minor or major. However, the healer expressed little sympathy as she strapped a sling onto Shanta's arm, as if disturbed that Credarain and the others had been violently killed. Shanta couldn't figure out why she was being so cold, considering the men got what they deserved for a lifetime of misdeeds. Perhaps she was worried about Toriche, who had fled on the wings and died in the salty water with everyone else. He had always treated her

well.

There were some men who weren't so abusive - and word got out as to who was who, especially when they hadn't yet chosen a mate. That's why Shanta pursued Madarain revolutions before, though Veema had gotten to him first.

One way Shanta could tell which relationship was going well was by the number of children a couple had. At the very least, a childbearing woman was tolerant enough of her mate to go through with the pregnancy. A select group of women didn't, and only they knew what they were doing to keep it from happening.

As their bellies grew, they would leave the village and get one of the long, thin, hooked rods hidden behind the large boulder on the side of the island where the nearest star set. Shanta had found several of them aboard one of the vessels that had sailed to their shores, which they looted, capsized and dragged back into the salty water after killing the navigator.

Shanta had used the rods on herself three times, biting her tongue and holding her breath as she carefully stuck it inside her, maneuvering it around until blood came pouring out - sometimes squirting. Later, she would squeeze out the gooey clump of Credarain's child like a bowel movement, then toss it into the

salty water as if throwing a stone.

Most women requested her help with this procedure, while others just wanted to know where the rods - which had rusted over time - were hidden. Before helping or telling, she'd swear the young women to secrecy. Not even Veema knew about it. Torana especially didn't know, and the healer had been ridiculed for not being able to explain why the birthrate had significantly dropped since Shanta found them 15 revolutions before.

Seven women had bled to death during the procedure, all of whom were trying it for the first time without any help. When the body was found, Torana - who clearly couldn't figure out what was happening - ruled each death as a suicide.

The first woman who died doing it was Shanta's sister, Anesa. Banca had gotten her pregnant. She was better off dead than with that man, anyway. They all were.

At that very moment, up in that tree, Shanta was finally happy that she hadn't killed herself - accidentally or purposely - before her uniting ceremony with Credarain. With him dead, and the other men gone, she felt a sense of freedom. She had Veema to thank.

There was only one thing left to worry about - the pale men.

She could see movement ahead in the fading sunlight. She clenched her spear.

...

Valsa ran through the woods, eyeing the treetops. That morning, after they chased away the two older pale men, Veema ordered several women to guard the village. If they saw her running, they would surely wonder why, bombard her with questions, then report their suspicions.

David was hidden far enough away from anyone's routine path. She wouldn't risk bringing him in any closer, even if it meant he'd have to be alone longer as she ran back to the village. She hoped he wouldn't get scared and run away, but wouldn't blame him if he did. Gaining his trust was hard enough, and she didn't want to lose it by leaving him out there for too long.

As she neared the village, Valsa slowed from a run to a fast walk. She looked at the trees again but didn't see anyone.

A minute later, she did.

It was Shanta, legs dangling over a branch, her woven shawl covering her head, a spear in her good hand. Her other arm was in a sling. Braided twine hung along the trunk. Valsa waved, thinking how hard it must have been for her to climb a tree with

only one arm.

'Have you seen anyone?' Shanta asked.

'No,' Valsa replied.

'You shouldn't be out there by yourself, Valsa.'

'I was walking by the water,' Valsa said as she passed underneath the tree where Shanta was sitting, seeing the soles of her dirty feet hovering overhead.

'Where is your flute?' Shanta asked slyly. Everyone knew that Valsa enjoyed playing her instrument by the water. She spent entire afternoons out there some days, sitting in the sand, letting the tide wash over her, puffing away on the wooden instrument that Torana had given her as a child.

'I left it in my hut,' she said, then hurried into a rear entrance to the village.

As she crossed the threshold, she noticed that the bodies of the staked Tormentcache men had been removed and replaced with two pale boys tied to poles in the ground. At first, Valsa couldn't tell if they were dead or alive. As she looked closer, she saw the one with sandy-colored hair shift his elbow. The other didn't move. Neither resembled David, though they looked to be about the same age. They had narrower faces and lighter hair.

Why is she doing this? Valsa thought, wanting to run to Veema and demand that they be released. Perhaps the self-appointed leader was saving them for a feast that night. Or perhaps she was keeping them as prisoners.

Veema sat on a log by the edge of the village, running a blade along the tip of a spear. There were two piles of wood on either side of her, at least a dozen with sharpened tips. The rest were either dull or hadn't been trimmed. A few of the spears had dry grassy patches strapped around the ends.

Against her better judgment, Valsa approached with her hands on her hips. *'Why are you holding these boys captive? What have they done to us?'*

Veema didn't even look up from her work. *'We caught them in the woods, trying to enter the village.'*

Valsa held her tongue - she didn't want to argue any further because she knew no good would come of it. Veema clearly wasn't in any mood to tolerate opposition. But Valsa still needed to know her intentions. She needed to warn David if her fears were true.

'You intend to kill every remaining pale man?' Valsa asked, trying to keep the accusatory tone out of her voice, though Veema

would still hear it. She glanced at the pile of spears, hoping they wouldn't be stained with blood by the night's end.

Veema grabbed another and began peeling off splinters with the blade. *'I just want to protect the village.'*

'Then why do you hold these two boys prisoner?' Valsa asked, looking at them again, hoping they weren't hurt.

'We tried to warn the pale men this morning that they are not wanted here,' Veema said. *'We have no reason to trust them.'*

Though Valsa was still unsure of Veema's intentions, she couldn't help but think that the new leader was at least partially correct. The women couldn't risk associating with the outsiders. Why would they be any different than their own men? Why did those two boys come to the village when two others had already been chased away?

Veema dropped the spear she was working on and grabbed another from the pile that was ready for battle. She tossed it to Valsa, who caught it.

'Be careful, Valsa,' Veema said, looking into her eyes for the first time, not a shred of worry in her voice.

Holding onto her new weapon, Valsa hurried away, heading for her mother's hut.

Lameena and Lusha, both of whom were mates with men killed on the stake, arrived with armfuls of unshaven spears and dumped them into their mother's pile. Another girl followed with bunches of scraggly dry grass. Veema muscled the blade into the wood and sliced off a splinter, letting it fall to the ground in a growing pile.

'Valsa must meet the same fate as Credarain and the others before we proceed,' Veema said to her twin daughters. *'Torana, too.'*

...

Torana sat nervously in her hut, passing the time by twisting and squeezing round leaves until drops of oil fell into the wooden bowl. The oil in this form was most potent. It created a thick coating over damaged flesh, healing the skin quickly. She had a stash saved up and spent a good portion of her day restocking, usually at night. Much of it was used on the blisters and scrapes the men suffered while working, but it healed on far deeper wounds, too.

If there was any benefit to the men leaving, it was that she now had fewer people to worry about. Other common problems that drained her oil supply would become defunct, as well, like

healing women who damaged themselves while killing their unborn children. She understood why they did it; they hated their permanent mates and believed that secretly denying them their offspring was revenge for their cruelty. That didn't make the procedure any safer, though. Many women ended up mutilating themselves, and in some cases, dying. All Torana could do to stop the bleeding was hold up the woman's legs and carefully pour a bowl of round leaf oil inside her womb. A full bowl took her an entire day to make, and she rarely received help from anyone. Shanta was responsible for more deaths and injuries than she could remember.

Torana had promised herself long before that she would heal anyone for any reason, no matter how or why they got hurt, and keep whatever secrets she knew to herself. Also, she knew that if she turned away anyone who needed help, even if their wounds were self-inflicted or even deserved, Ithariche would have stripped her of her duties. If the men had found out what Shanta and so many other women were doing, their brutality would have surely increased, leading to more injuries and deaths.

Forcing out children prematurely wasn't the only reason the population had declined, Torana believed. The elders said that

there used to be several hundred people living on the island at once. Prior to Ithariche leading the men to their deaths on the shining wings, 81 people roamed the land, not including Abunda's child who hadn't yet left the womb. While most mothers only had one child, Torana was lucky to have two - Crediche and Valsa - but had tried and failed to have more. Many women came to her asking why they were having a hard time getting pregnant, but she didn't know the answer. There had to be a reason why deaths - whether natural, suicide, accidental, murder or punishment - outnumbered births.

Torana had more important things to worry about at that moment than the Tore population. She kept the cloth door of her hut unhooked so she could have a clear view of the two pale boys across the village, hoping Veema would keep her promise to release them by nightfall.

Valsa poked her head through the entrance. *'I am grateful that you are here,'* she said to her mother, leaning a spear against the outside wall before crawling in. She hooked shut the cloth behind her.

Torana tossed aside the leaves. *'Veema wanted to kill those pale boys but I talked her into keeping them as prisoners until*

the nearest star sets. Some women suggested eating them but I insisted that their flesh was tainted with disease.'

Valsa spoke softly, a nervous delight in her voice. *'I have befriended a pale man.'*

Torana's eyes seemed to pop out of her sockets.

'I am hiding him in the forest now. He is very nice. I have already spent much time with him.'

Torana just stared at her only daughter. Slowly, a smile crept to her face. *'He is not frightened?'*

'Perhaps he is frightened now that I left him alone, but I intend to return now. Please come with me.'

Without second thought, Torana grabbed her satchel and they exited.

Valsa and Ithariche lived next to Torana and Toriche. As Valsa went inside her hut to grab some fruit and other items, Torana waited by the entrance, watching Veema across the village.

The new warlord and a few others continued preparing spears, honing the tips and tossing them into an ever-growing pile. Torana knew that the previous night's bloody overthrow was only the beginning. The land was bound for another massive fertilization. Even before the bodies of the six staked

Tormentcaches would fully merge with the land, perhaps three times as many pale men would join them in the soil. What they walked on were the bodies of people who had died since their ancestors sprouted. The deep salty water made up the tears of the dead; each strand of straw, their hair; the trees, their arms and legs.

With several new spears by her side and even more being manufactured, Torana knew Veema would kill those pale boys soon enough. If she would go against her word to release them, then she would kill anyone who stood in her way, even the healer.

Valsa exited with a satchel around her neck. She was in such a hurry to get back to David that she almost forgot to grab the spear she rested on the side of the hut.

'Is this yours?' Torana asked, grabbing the weapon.

'Yes. Veema gave it to me,' Valsa said as her mother handed it to her.

The two could sense the eyes staring at them as they walked out of the village.

'I now believe that Veema will kill those boys,' Torana said as she and her daughter walked past the threshold. *'She is not carving those spears simply to protect our homes.'*

Valsa hushed her mother and pointed to Shanta, who was still sitting up in the tree.

'Where are you going?' Credarain's former mate turned her head, asking with a friendly tone in her voice that sounded phony.

'That is not your business,' Torana hissed. Valsa had never heard her speak that way, though Shanta had no right or reason to question either of them.

'There are pale men out there who want to rape and kill you,' Shanta said, now sounding angrier than concerned for their well-being.

The two women didn't look back as they walked beneath Shanta's dangling legs and journeyed into the forest.

10

Rusty dry-heaved the moment Steve plunked down the bloody swine by the fire.

"Just do your best," he said, then turned to walk away.

Rusty looked at its snout, its little pig ears, its black marble eyes, and the blood cluttering its slit throat.

"What the fuck, Steve, you think I know how to cook this?"

Steve turned around. "You got a problem, man?"

His pulse quickening, Rusty picked up the chef's knife out of an empty pot. "I don't know how to cook this shit, Steve. I don't know the first thing about skinning an animal."

"Watch your mouth, Rusty." Steve's voice rose, but not loud enough for the campers to overhear while they played Frisbee in the field.

"Okay, but I still don't know how to cook this," Rusty said, rolling the knife's handle in his palm, both eyes on the head counselor.

"Where's Johnny?"

"He went to the spring to get some water," Rusty said.

"I'll be back in a minute." With dried blood on his hands, Steve headed toward the water hole.

Meg was talking with some girls by the shelters, making them grimace as she pointed at the dead boar. From the field, Jason saw the animal and announced it to the others. Soon, all of the boys ran up and stood around.

"Is it dead?" Suzzie asked. Several guys laughed and called him a moron.

"That's enough!" Rusty said before more insults came. Stupid question or not, he didn't want anyone ridiculing the girl. He

spent a good deal of elementary school picking on other kids. When he started smoking weed at 13, suddenly people were making fun of the stupid things he said. One day when he showed up to class drunk, someone made a snide remark about his unkempt appearance, and it turned violent.

Rusty raised the knife and slammed it down over the hoof.

...

The campers ate slabs of campfire-roasted pork. The meat was a little rough but chewable, much of it cooked, but some parts a bit raw. A few of them opted to eat only berries. Deanna had come out of the tent for the first time in several hours to join them.

"Where's Shawn, Billy, and David?" Jason asked while gnawing on a slice of swine. Others had been asking the same thing, but Steve said he'd tell them after dinner. At that point, the counselor realized he couldn't keep putting it off.

"That's what I was about to talk to you about," Steve stood in front of the group as they ate. "Now I told everyone to stay near the camp. Remember, everyone is safe here. In case you haven't figured it out, we're probably on the wrong island."

A number of campers stopped eating and looked around, confused.

"Somehow, we ended up here, and the island just happens to be inhabited. We had to find out the hard way that these natives existed, and unfortunately, we lost a life. The native men took the plane for their own reasons. George probably saved our lives by taking off with them, otherwise we'll never know what could've happened.

"Now some natives are still here, mostly women. Johnny and I went there today and found them, and even helped deliver one's baby. Then they chased us away. We didn't tell you guys because we didn't want you to panic. But we did tell you to stick together and stay near the camp. Billy, Shawn and David didn't do that, and now I don't know where they are. If you wander into those woods, you may not come back. What I'm afraid of is that they decided to kill anyone who came near them after Johnny and I left. Billy, Shawn and David are most likely dead now."

Some of the girls whimpered and covered their ears.

"We're all hoping some rescue planes will be looking for us, but it might take a longer because we're on the wrong island. We must all stay nearby, and not wander into those woods no matter what. I remember back in the cub scouts, at those overnight camp-outs, my scoutmaster would tell us stories of the monsters

in the woods. Well, this is true now. I promise you, not one of you will get hurt if you stay near the campsite."

"*Oh my god!*" Deanna buried her head in her lap as Meg and others came to comfort her. A moment later she got up and ran behind the tent. Meg chased after her until she saw the camper hunched over, throwing up.

"We're keeping guard tonight, so I don't want anyone to worry," Steve said confidently, not a hint of concern in his voice.

The campers chatted nervously, forgetting about their meals. Steve regretted making that speech while they were still eating. Now they wouldn't finish and all of that food would go to waste.

Meg followed Deanna back into the tent, while Steve, Johnny and Rusty sat together by the fire. A soft breeze shifted the direction of the smoke into their faces.

"Rusty, you're on guard from nine to midnight," Steve said grimly, staring into the woods. "Meg and I got from midnight until three. Then Johnny, you'll take over."

Rusty barely heard him. He couldn't stop staring at the bugs flying around the boar's carcass. Johnny barely heard him, either. He was staring into the woods, his hands curled up, one

finger pointing and curling back into his fist.

Part IV

1

Oh god I'm gonna die out here I know it, David thought, wishing he had a watch on to see what time it was. It was getting dark. He hadn't moved an inch since Valsa left, and his legs were cramping. Instead of stretching, he was too busy debating whether he should crawl out of the hiding place and make a mad dash for the beach, then follow it back around until he got to the camp. That would have been the sane thing to do. That's what his parents would have wanted him to do.

But something held him back. He knew Valsa would return. He knew she would come back to him and they would make love that night under the stars. If he got up and ran back to the camp, not only would he regret it for the rest of his life, but he wouldn't be able to live with himself knowing that he had traded in that royal flush just because he felt jittery cashing it in.

A few years before, there was a girl in elementary school - Becky Reagan - who had a crush on him. She was smart and pretty, but when she had passed him a note asking him to be her

boyfriend, David tore it up. The whole thing embarrassed him because he hadn't gotten out of the girls-have-cooties stage of his life yet. He broke her heart, only because he was paranoid about being in that situation.

No girl had made a proposition like that to him since, and he had been scared that he had blown his only opportunity. Then Valsa came along, a supermodel islander frolicking along the beach, playing a flute, reaching out to the newcomer flirtatiously and risking her own neck at the same time. Maybe this had been *her* first chance at being with a man she actually liked, and she had worked hard to put on that flawless presentation to lure him in.

Somehow, David didn't think that was the case. Those native men would've been all over her, and surely she would've liked one of them.

He started to have second thoughts about getting naked with her... assuming that's where the night was headed. He would rather die than be with a whore. Deanna was a whore. Many girls at school were whores. Well, they weren't complete whores. After all, they didn't go after *him*. As far as David knew, a whore was someone who fooled around with everyone *but* him.

Through the narrow opening between the treetops, David could see a long cloud race through the darkening sky, like a snake slithering in the heavens. Even the end of it curled upward like a rattler's tail. Then it disappeared, leaving him alone again at the bottom of the well of trees.

David flipped open his knife and carefully ran his thumb along the serrated edge at the bottom, then along the smooth part to the tip. His father had bought it for him as a birthday gift that winter because David had lost his Swiss Army knife in the woods by his house a few weeks earlier. He didn't like the Swiss Army knives because they were flimsy and broke easily. This one was far sturdier and flipped open with a spring when his thumbnail nudged the knob.

'David?'

The voice came from right behind him and he swung around to see Valsa's head poking from the leafy corridor. The evening shadows didn't do her any favors, and the smile that seemed to be permanently stretched across her face was gone. She had a satchel strapped around her shoulder, and a spear in her hand.

As she crawled through, David folded the knife shut and stuck it in his pocket. Valsa stood and dropped her belongings on

the ground.

Another face emerged from the entrance. Startled, David stepped back, digging for his knife again.

'Torana,' Valsa said, pointing to the woman as she stood.

David grabbed onto the handle but quickly realized that the new woman meant no harm. Valsa was very careful to hide him up until that point - there's no way the new woman would be anyone but a friend to him.

He pulled his hand out of his pocket, but kept his eye on the new woman, who he believed was Valsa's mother. She stepped up to him with an excited grin and reached out both hands. David did so as well, revealing a line of blood flowing from his thumb to his wrist. The moment he saw it, he suddenly felt the pain. It hadn't been the first time he sliced his hand.

Just as his mother would have, Torana took David's hand and examined the cut. She flipped it upward and squeezed around the incision, then guided his fingers to the same place. David clenched it just as she had. Valsa tugged at one of the large leaves from the surrounding trees and handed it to Torana, who lightly rubbed it on David's thumb.

It burned. It felt like he had dipped it in salt water.

David looked at his thumb and noticed small bubbles popping along the length of the gash.

Torana and Valsa began speaking to each other, and David listened carefully. Though he didn't understand what they were saying, certain words sounded familiar, but the pronunciation was off. In that case, they could have been saying anything. He knew that people spoke English in all sorts of dialects and speeds but could still understand each other. That didn't happen in Chinese - at least what he knew of it.

Valsa dropped to her knees and started drawing in the sand again. It was much darker now and David could barely see what she was doing. Torana was digging through her satchel, then pulled out a few stones and some kindling that was bound with twine.

She piled the small branches on the ground, then began rubbing the stones together. Several sparks flew with each collision, landing on the kindling and sending up a narrow stream of smoke. Cupping her hands around it, she blew softly for a moment until the flame spread.

David couldn't believe how quickly she lit the fire. He had always thought that method required hours of labor and several blisters before a spark even formed. Apparently, these people

weren't as primitive as he had thought. He wished he had matches or a lighter with him so he could show them his method.

Meanwhile, Valsa continued drawing simple pictures in the sand. There was a large circle, and three spots marked off - one in the center, one on the edge, and one close to the edge but seemed to be randomly placed. Outside the circle, she drew three people - two females and a male - then a line connecting them to the random spot. She pointed to those people and then to herself, David and Torana.

Next, she drew two more males and connected them with the spot on the edge... then a squiggly line from the edge to the center of the circle, as if the two men had traveled there.

David couldn't believe what he was seeing. Valsa slid her finger along the length of the two boys. They were trapped. Or killed. He wasn't sure. No, they weren't killed, because Valsa would have made an X over them.

Just to be sure, David moved his finger in an X pattern above the two figures, but Valsa shook her head, then furiously pointed to the center of the circle, poking her finger into the earth.

Two people had wandered into the forest and had been

captured. They are alive.

2

As the sky faded to its darkest shade, the stars shined to their brightest. Johnny Stewart sat on a log by the fire, breathing steadily as several thoughts battled in his head for priority.

There was the dead boy he had buried without his parents permission - someone who would be dug right back up after rescue - a rape victim, three others missing and no way home. He couldn't do anything about any of that. The only thing he could do was focus on minimizing the likelihood of other bad things to come.

Billy, Shawn and David were being held captive. He couldn't assume they were dead, just like he couldn't assume everyone in his platoon had been killed after the Viet Cong ambushed them. If knowing for sure meant risking his life, so be it. He would wait until everyone went to sleep, grab his gun, storm into the forest, and shoot every gook - woman or child - then free the hostages...

Grab my gun?

Johnny felt like slapping himself in the face but he took a

deep breath instead.

This ain't Nam!

Billy, Shawn and David had to be dead. The women also probably killed those men by shoving poles through their bottoms. Yet, they let him and Steve off with barely a slap on the wrist because they helped deliver that child. Though the women's lapse in security led to a kind gesture, they wouldn't take another chance with an outsider wandering to their village. That had to be their intention; otherwise they would have already stormed the camp and killed everyone.

Johnny knew those women hadn't staked those men for mere twisted pleasure. Punishment that severe resulted from years of mistreatment, routine mental and physical abuse. He couldn't imagine - nor did he want to know - what they had to suffer in order to become so desperate. Also, having to set a foreign policy in the midst of their revolt obviously didn't ease the tension amongst the new leaders. However, he also knew that he shouldn't sympathize with them when they either killed or held prisoner three of his troops.

Around the campsite, the teens had resumed talking, laughing and goofing off. Once in a while one of the younger ones would

break out crying, then continue joking around before his or her tears even dried.

In Vietnam, Johnny's platoon would get drunk or high whenever they had the chance. Though he joined them, no more than five minutes would pass before he thought about the enemy bursting into their barracks and ending their lives in a bloody, painful way.

He expected more fear out of the campers, more emotional hysterics and less screwing around. It made his job easier because he didn't have to comfort them all day long, but he had to be concerned that they weren't huddled together like frightened victims-to-be in a horror movie. *They should be scared shitless!* he thought as he shifted himself so the wind blew the fire's smoke into his face.

Steve Simmons chatted with Meg and a few campers on the other side of the campground. From a distance, it looked like he was preaching to an anxious audience... either that or telling scary stories. Johnny had planned on telling stories - the same ones he used to tell his kids at Yosemite as they sipped hot cocoa by the fire. His favorite was about the legend of the Sasquatch that roamed the local forest. At the end, he'd show the

scar on his arm - one he got from falling in a cave years before - but say it was a mark from fighting with the monster. Nobody, not even his youngest child, ever believed him, but they were entertained nonetheless. He had been looking forward to changing the setting to the island, and even rehearsed in his head before the camp session began.

It was 10 p.m. Rusty sat on the edge of the camp, facing the darkened woods. The boys were lying in their sleeping bags and shelters, playing Hearts and other card games under the flashlights. Meg chatted with some girls. Steve went into the tent to check on Deanna again. Johnny pulled out a cigarette, stuck the head of it into the fire, and inhaled, feeling the warmth on his face as the flame reflected in his glasses.

He walked over and sat beside Rusty.

"You did one helluva job cooking that meat," he said, patting his back as he did many times before.

"I've been meaning to talk to you," Rusty said somberly, without taking his eyes off the forest.

"What's up?" Johnny asked, hearing the uneasiness in Rusty's voice.

"I think it was my fault Brendan got killed."

"What?" That was the last thing he expected to hear Rusty say. "No it wasn't. All sorts of things happened..."

"I gave Brendan a condom before they left last night. They probably wandered off into the woods so no one would catch them. It's my fault for that." Rusty's voice cracked as if he were on the verge of crying.

"You did what? Rusty, if all this shit didn't happen, I would've fired you... no I wouldn't, but you had no business doing that!"

"They probably would've done it anyway. I wanted to at least make sure they played it safe." Rusty still wouldn't look at him.

"You call going out into the woods at night safe?"

"And it's not like I told them to go out there. I didn't even see them leave."

"Even still, I wish you hadn't of done that. If their parents wanted them to be safe, their parents would've given them condoms. They were both bright kids. I doubt they would've done it without protection."

"I was just making sure."

"Damned if I would've given my kids condoms just to 'make sure.' My kids know better than that." Johnny couldn't recall

ever being angry with Rusty before, and he could tell by his voice that it was tearing him apart.

"Johnny, I may have a kid because of careless sex. Now I don't know Brendan and Deanna, but I saw the way they were hanging around each other. There isn't a convenience store around here. If anything, I could have saved her from getting pregnant."

Johnny took a long drag of his cigarette and exhaled slowly. "You're making sense. These aren't my kids and I can't help it if they do it or not. It just seemed to me that the what you gave him could have been the deciding factor which made them do it."

"But we don't know that."

"I guess we'll never know," Johnny sighed. "Listen, I've gotta get some sleep. You were right to tell me about that, and it ain't your fault that Brendan got killed. No hard feelings, man."

Johnny stood and patted Rusty on the back.

Rusty finally turned his head and looked him in the eye.

"Thanks."

Johnny flicked his cigarette butt to the ground and stomped on it. He went to his shelter, stretched out on his sleeping bag with his boots still on, took off his glasses and shut his eyes.

...

"I'm gonna kill them, I swear," he whispered to the camper. The fire's light from outside shined through the tent's polyester wall, creating a green glow on her skin. Her eyes were open, and she was lying on the waterproof floor - not even on her sleeping bag. Drool fell from the corner of her mouth onto the mini pillow that he had shoved beneath her head.

The light disappeared behind an approaching silhouette.

"Steve, you in there?" Meg asked.

"Yeah," he said in the dark, wiping away his tears with his wrist.

Meg unzipped the entrance, entered, then closed it behind her. "How's she doing?"

"Not good," he said, trying to keep his voice from cracking.

Meg flicked on a flashlight and put her hand on Deanna's forehead. "No fever, at least."

"I'm going back to the village. If they're alive, I'll rescue them. If they're dead, then we're next."

One side of Steve's face glowed in the flashlight's beam. He reached around his back, under his shirt, and pulled something from his shorts. A revolver.

Meg couldn't speak, not even a gasp or an '*Oh my god.*'

"See, we have the edge. We've had the edge all along. Don't worry." Steve said softly. Meg drew back as if he were about to shoot her. Steve's face was hard and serious. "I'm not gonna kill anyone. It's only for protection."

Meg's face tensed and the tears raced down her cheeks as she buried her head into her arms. Steve stuck the gun back in the belted holster and covered it with his shirt. He gave her a hug, a peck on the head, then left the tent, leaving it unzipped.

3

David was eating some sort of fruit that Valsa had given him. It looked exactly like a pear, but tasted like a kiwi. He hadn't seen anything other than berries growing in the trees. There was probably a section of the island where all sorts of things grew, he thought.

Torana and Valsa spent several minutes talking to each other before it started to sound like they were arguing. He knew they were discussing the hostages, but wished they could tell him *who* was being held prisoner. If it were Johnny and Steve, there was little he could do, even if he returned to the camp to tell everyone. If it were two campers, then Johnny and Steve would

need to know, if they didn't already. Of course, from their perspective, David was missing, too, and probably believed to be another casualty. The people in the village were clearly hostile, and would kill the hostages if anyone came to rescue them. He wondered if he should return to the camp just to show that he was safe.

A moment later, Valsa's head shifted and David could see the firelight reflecting in her eyes. She pointed back to the drawing and scooted her finger from their location to the village. Then she pointed at the two hostages, racing her fingers back to the campsite.

We'll free the hostages, David thought. *That's what she means.*

Perhaps that was the best option. Johnny and Steve wouldn't be able to rescue them because they would have to battle whoever was in the village. Torana and Valsa would have a much better chance of success. Maybe they would stand guard while everyone else slept, then release them. Also, if David returned that night, the hostages by his side, he'd be a hero.

Torana continued talking. Whatever she was saying, it was quickly draining the life out of Valsa's face. A moment later,

the mother reached over and hugged her, but Valsa's arms fell limply to her side.

Then, Torana stood, grabbed Valsa's spear, nodded to David, and crouched through the exit.

David started to follow but Valsa grabbed his arm and shook her head. Then she pointed two fingers on her right hand to their location on the picture, and moved a finger on left hand toward the village. Apparently, she was saying that they would wait there while Torana went to free the hostages.

David didn't quite understand, and wished more than ever that he could understand her language. *Why are we waiting here? How is Torana gonna rescue them?*

While Valsa began digging through her satchel, David looked at his thumb. The bleeding had stopped and a white thin film covered the length of his cut. It tingled.

Valsa pulled a small patch of dried grass from the bag and began rolling it tightly into a dried leaf. It resembled a cigar. David had never smoked before. The only people he knew who smoked were the same jerks who thought they were too cool to hang out with him. Maybe Valsa was that type, after all. If he had met her at school, she wouldn't have looked twice at him.

David shook his head, realizing none of that mattered. Valsa was there with him, and he refused to change his opinion of her just because she was a smoker.

When she was finished rolling the cigar, she licked the length of it, then stuck it between her lips. With the small fire burning inches from her face, she stuck its tip in the flame and inhaled, then pulled away as smoke streamed into the air.

David's nostrils flared as he caught a whiff of the strong herbal fumes. No cigar smelled like that. Perhaps it wasn't a cigar, after all. Maybe it was marijuana, or some other drug. No way was he going to do that.

Valsa smiled for the first time in a long time as she seemed to put aside her worries. She offered David the cigar, or whatever it was.

Oh man, I really don't wanna do this. He thought back to the anti-drug seminars at school. They made up skits in which one person pretended to be a dealer, and another had to come up with a fancy way of saying no. "Drugs are for losers," he said to the imaginary pusher when it was his turn to stand up in front of the class. He certainly wasn't going to say that to Valsa.

The thick fog of smoke hit his face. He could feel his head

grow lighter as it filled with an eerie pleasure. It felt good to breath, like flavored air was swirling through his nose.

Valsa continued holding it out to him, and he finally took it.

He put the cigar to his lips and inhaled, then coughed repeatedly to get the smoke out of his lungs. His head floated and stars flashed in front of his eyes. Valsa sat three feet in front of him but she seemed to be getting closer without moving. His vision suddenly became crisper, and she became more beautiful.

Then she moved toward him, arms grabbing onto his shoulders, her smile growing larger.

...

Torana didn't travel through the woods in the dark very often because she hadn't any reason. She normally went to sleep soon after the nearest star set, except when there was a feast, which happened every time the moon was free of the Great Sphere's shadow. Then, she wished she had spent more time navigating the forest during the unlit hours so all would be more familiar. It wasn't as bad as she thought, however, when she suddenly heard women's laughter, and knew she hadn't gotten the paths mixed up.

She was hesitant about returning to the village because Veema clearly saw her as a threat. Those two men who came and helped deliver Abunda's child seemed nice enough, but Veema made enemies out of them. Though the intentions of the two boys - now hostages - weren't clear, few doubted the new leader when she said they were hostile. Both times, Torana came to their defenses, and she wouldn't have been surprised if Veema saw that as a reason to stake her.

Hopefully, she was smarter than that, Torana thought. The new leader would be doing a disservice by killing the only healer on the island. Regardless, Veema certainly wouldn't keep her word to let the hostages go. She'd roast them over the fire just as they had other foreigners. No one would challenge her, and she was sure to order the death of anyone who tried. She didn't even have power for more than a day, and already Torana was having flashbacks to Retariche's reign. If anything, she preferred things the way they were, only a day before, when Ithariche had control, Toriche annoyed her, and the shining wings hadn't shattered their lives. Things weren't ideal then, but certainly calmer than an era of power struggles.

To Veema's credit, however, she was the only one who wanted

to lead the tribe, and had earned control the moment she saved the women from Credarain and his council. But having Veema in charge meant there would be war with the pale men, and the pale men had shown no hostility. They hadn't traveled to such a small island to seize control when they had all of the Favored Land to roam. Now, because of Veema, the intruders had every reason to fulfill the prophecy... that was, unless she immediately freed the hostages.

As she neared the village, Torana's only plan was to reason with Veema. Also, she instructed Valsa to say goodbye to David and tell him to return immediately to his people. Hopefully, he would convince them not to attack the village, if that's what they were planning. Meanwhile, she insisted that Valsa stay hidden in the forest no matter what happened.

The odds of everything working out for the best were extremely slim. After all, they were up against the prophecy.

'Who is there?' someone asked not too far ahead.

Torana squinted as she approached, seeing by the moonlight someone wearing a shawl over her head and a sling around her shoulder and arm. It was Shanta, down from the branch, holding two spears together in her good hand.

'Veema seeks your council immediately,' she said. 'Where is Valsa? She needs to speak with her, too. Is she still by the shore? Can you take me to her? Veema really needs to speak with her.'

Torana stopped, seeing Shanta twitch nervously, as if trying to send her subliminal messages to run back into the forest and never return to the village.

I will soon die, she thought.

...

Veema had all sorts of plans for that evening, but she had to change every one of them. She quickly realized that many women were preoccupied with their children, who had been misbehaving since their fathers had left them. Also, she was tired, and she had blisters on her hands from honing all of those spears.

As she curled up on the straw bed inside her hut, eight women stood guard in and around the village. Veema had already told them what to do if they saw Torana, Valsa or more pale men. They would be relieved of their duties just before the nearest star rose, and replaced by six others. By midday, after the night guards got some sleep, a full crew with new weapons would be ready to storm the beach.

They would kill every pale adult and anyone who fought back. Those whom they captured or who surrendered would be forced to build shelters, dig holes, cook food, gather firewood, and anything else she wanted. This idea hadn't crossed her mind until that afternoon, when Torana was bugging her about releasing the two hostages. There was no sense in doing that, nor did she want to continue the disgusting tradition of cooking and eating whoever washed up on their shores.

Perhaps they could even force the males to help the women procreate. There were only nine Tore boys on the island, including two infants - all of whom were several revolutions removed from having the ability to produce the seed of life. With the adult males gone, their population was in jeopardy, and Veema wanted to fix that as quickly as possible. If the pale men were more potent than Madarain, maybe even she could have more children. It had been 17 long revolutions since she had given birth to Lameena and Lusha.

Veema even considered letting Torana live to help deliver these half-Tore, half-pale infants. But the healer clearly didn't care to defend the village against the enemy. Shanta, who had always expressed interest in delivering children - could take

over her duties.

Veema rolled over, smiled, shut her eyes, and drifted off to sleep.

...

Lameena and Lusha stood in the center of the village by a small fire, smoking cannabis as they guarded the two pale boys.

The sisters each had a pair of spears by their sides. Their mother had ordered all of the guards to have two - one to throw, and one for defense. If they needed more, Veema had spread several around on racks for easy access.

'Hello, little boy,' Lameena said in between puffs of smoke, looking at the one who still had his eyes open. *'Would you like to embrace me?'*

Lusha started laughing loudly as her sister perched her lips at the hostage. She was busy rubbing the round leaf on a gash that she got while struggling with the men the night before.

'All of our men are gone. Perhaps you would like to be my permanent mate.' Lameena pointed between the boy's legs and squinted. *'Never mind, you are practically a woman!'*

Across the village, Lusha saw Shanta hurrying toward Veema's hut, holding a spear.

'Shanta, you are not supposed to leave your post! Did you find Torana and Valsa?' Lusha asked, still chuckling, but Shanta disappeared inside.

The sisters looked at one another and shrugged. Then Lameena went back to taunting one of the boys, perching her lips.

A moment later, they saw Shanta exit Veema's hut with the spear and hurry out of the village.

4

While some of the campers slept, many just laid there, thinking. Rusty looked at his watch. It was nearly midnight. He got up from the stump and approached Steve, who was lying in his shelter. "Hey man, your turn on guard."

"All right. I'll be there in a sec." Steve slid on his boots. "Go get Meg."

"Where is she?"

"She's in the tent."

"Cool." Rusty walked over, knocking on the green polyester entrance. "Meg, wake up," he whispered. "Meg!"

"I hear you." Meg unzipped the tent and crawled out. Rusty walked to his shelter, took off his boots, dropped to the sleeping bag and shut his eyes.

Meg sat on a log at the lookout spot, resting her elbows on her knees, cupping her chin. Steve walked over a moment later.

"I'm leaving now. Don't say a word." He kissed her on the forehead, then walked straight into the woods, not even checking to see if anyone was watching. Meg didn't move at all.

5

Torana sprinted through the forest, pulling off the shawl and the sling, looking to return them to the body that she left in a mass of bushes.

When she returned to find Shanta's corpse where she left it, Torana paused and suddenly burst into tears.

She fell to her knees as berries and root stew shot up from her stomach and spilled onto the ground, mixing with the tears that fell from her eyes.

6

Sgt. Leonard McCoy stood in the Jacoby's living room, staring at the broken glass of the deck's door.

McCoy had spent the entire night at the station investigating the plane incident. The black box had some interesting sounds, aside from George Kraser's panicking voice. No one could figure out which foreign language the hijackers were

speaking.

Jill Jacoby and her son Chris were still at the police station, but they didn't see or hear anything unusual the night before.

Using a handkerchief, he slid the door open. From the bottom of the wooden stairs, a long row of grass angled toward the house next door.

"Hey!" McCoy poked his head back inside. "Call in SWAT. Now."

7

The Tormentcaches fell asleep soon after their wrestling matches ended. They sprawled across the fuzzy ground and the comfortable long seats, resting peacefully amongst the odor of singed flesh. Ithariche had dragged the remains of the corpulent body to the lowest level, joining him with Basariche and the other pale man.

As the nearest star rose, Madarain was first to wake. It took him a few minutes to pull himself up, but he finally did.

He stepped over the scattered bodies, peering at their bland and unhealthy faces. Ithariche looked to be the worst of them all, fidgeting in his sleep as if he were having a bad dream.

Madarain thought about looking at himself in the reflector glass - if he could find one that Ithariche didn't smash - to see if his face was paler, too. It was the new environment, the air and the water, giving their bodies these problems. It would eventually kill them.

That was, if Hraptor's army didn't kill them first. He knew that the pale men would be there soon - perhaps that morning. There was no hurry. They would come and the prophecy of destruction would be fulfilled.

Most everyone had stopped believing the story of Hraptor's destroyer after the first set of shining wings arrived during Itharain's reign. It was the one tale that didn't seem to change depending on who repeated it, though each storyteller had his own opinion about its credibility. Madarain's father - who told it to him when he was just a child - didn't believe it.

There was one legend that Madarain had heard only once, and it fascinated him more than any other. Shortly after Retariche died, Honta told Ithariche about the boatmen, and swearing him to secrecy. One night, after a feast, an inebriated Ithariche repeated it to Madarain. He said that more than 100 revolutions before, a group of slaves fled from a land ruled by dictators,

and their vessels landed on an island. Ashamed of their past, they altered their entire history. Generations passed, and these lies became the only truth they knew.

Though Madarain knew this tale only from Ithariche, and Ithariche only knew it from Honta, there was something about it that seemed more probable than any of the other stories that the elders spread and altered. The tale itself explained why no one else knew it. Somehow, it must have slipped through the generations, a dark secret that contradicted everything they believed. Perhaps, in their final hours, that truth would emerge, right before the prophecy destroyed them all.

Madarain walked up to the second level, taking time to gaze at the etchings of vast monuments and terrain, reprinted on thick paper, bordered by brass or tree remnants. One was broken in the center, shattered in a star pattern. He briefly wondered why before realizing it was an insignificant thought. Suddenly, he felt a creak in his lower back. He stopped, rubbed himself, then continued to the top.

There he saw the gate that led to the pale woman's prison. Banca had told him about her and the child. He stood there, wondering if he should let them out while the others were

sleeping. He reached for the latch.

Just as he was about to open it, he heard Tore voices mumbling in the lower level. He let go and continued walking, making his way to the chamber with the mystical screens. Perhaps there he could see Hraptor's army surrounding the grand hut. He could sit back and watch them light fire to the dwelling. Everyone inside, even the hostages, would choke on the smoke, or burn to death.

When he entered the chamber, Madarain could see the top of a head peaking over the top of a tall-backed seat.

'Crediche?' he asked, recognizing the small hands dangling over the sides. He was looking at the screens, probably fascinated with the visions that they produced. 'Crediche?' He spun the tall seat around on its axis.

Crediche's head leaned to his right shoulder. Red legions circled his neck, and blood dripped from the corners of his lips. Madarain gasped, wondering who would do such a thing.

Banca, he thought, pressing his palm against the boy's chest, feeling for a heartbeat that he didn't expect.

'Ayah!'

The scream made him jump and spin around. Ithariche stood in

the doorway, still wearing the pale man's robe, his spear set to jab.

Madarain's hand remained on the boy's chest.

'You killed him?' Ithariche hissed. Any other man would have been dead on the spot. But this was Madarain, the most trusted of the council members. This was the man who helped raise him, who taught him, and shaped him into a leader. Ithariche couldn't imagine why Madarain would kill Crediche, nor did he believe he actually did it. But there he stood, his hand on the young boy in a secluded room in the early day. Maybe he didn't do it, and he just found him there.

Madarain looked at the spear, its tip pointed at his stomach. He could see the rage boiling in Ithariche's eyes, a rage he had seen many revolutions before.

'Yes.'

Ithariche screamed and shot the spear forward, just as something appeared on one of the mystical screens.

Madarain could have easily stepped aside, pulled the weapon alongside his torso, punched Ithariche in the face, grabbed the spear and stab him through his heart. The stick hit its mark, straight through. Ithariche's hand, still holding the weapon

close to the middle, shivered against Madarain's bleeding skin. On the other end, the spear hit the screen, shattering one of the images that showed the pale men in black surrounding the hut.

8

Torana wasn't one to act spontaneously, nor was she one to inflict any pain, let alone death, upon anyone. She had dedicated her life to healing wounds and researching potential cures for common and uncommon ailments. Then this night came.

She felt like a completely different person when she killed Veema and Shanta. It was like someone else had been inside her body, moving her arms, legs, hands and feet, wildly plunging that blade into their flesh. With each stab, each pierce, a lightning bolt shot up her arm and into her head, bursting and rattling her brain. It was the destroyer, who had exited the shining wings, wandered into the forest, and jumped into her skin.

By morning, the others would discover Veema's body. Lameena and Lusha would remember Shanta entering her hut, so they'd go looking for her. When they found Shanta's corpse, they'd blame, of course, Torana and Valsa.

Torana grabbed Shanta by the arms and dragged her through the woods, further from the village. The best place to dispose of

the body was the salty water. No one would find her there. Just the thought of that made her stomach churn. She couldn't bear to drag Shanta another foot let alone halfway across the island.

She did anyway.

9

"Johnny, wake up!" Meg shook his shoulders. "*Johnny!*"

He opened his eyes. "What is it?"

"It's Steve. He went into the woods with a gun!"

Johnny grabbed his glasses and jumped up.

"What's going on?" someone asked.

For a split second, Meg thought it was one of the campers and was about to spin around and tell him to get back to bed. It was Rusty. "Steve left," she said.

Johnny stuck his finger to his lips to quiet her, then whispered, "I'm going after him."

"You *can't!*" Meg had a hard time restraining her voice and by that time the campers were sitting up, ears perked, mouths gaping.

"Then I'm going with you," Rusty said.

"No," Johnny replied.

"*Oh my god.*" Meg started crying.

"Johnny, you're not going out there alone, man."

By this time, all of the campers had crawled from their shelters, wiping the tears away while listening to the counselors speak of marching off to their potential deaths. What Johnny thought should have been hyperactive screams of disapproval were but mere whimpers, no doubt weakened by the hallucinatory air that they breathed.

"All right, come on," Johnny said, but didn't look happy.

With disapproving words on the edge of her tongue, Meg threw her arms around Johnny, then Rusty, squeezing them tight before turning to the campers.

Deanna, one of the few who remained within her shelter, had the sleeping bag pulled over her head.

...

She walked with Brendan through the woods, hand-in-hand. They went nearly five minutes without saying anything. It seemed they were all finished with small chat. After more than ten hours of being together since they had met, there wasn't much left to talk about.

"What did Rusty give to you earlier?" She recalled seeing Rusty pull Brendan to the side and hand him something. She didn't

think anything of it at first, and it probably wasn't anything important, but that was the only thing that came to mind.

"You wouldn't believe it if I told you," he said.

Deanna stopped and flashed him a smile. "Now I really gotta know."

"Okay, but promise you won't freak out," he said.

"Freak out?" She lost her smile.

"Apparently, Rusty is a pervert and thought that I'd try to go all the way with you, even though we just met."

"What?"

"He gave me a condom."

"You're kidding me! Oh my god, lemme see it."

"I didn't bring it out here, then you'd think I really was trying to make it with you."

"Like, oh my god, this is too funny," she said, throwing her arms into the air. "I mean, I like you and all, but we just met!"

"Don't say anything about it to Rusty. He was just making sure we were safe if something happened."

"Sweet guy," she said. "More like... a pervert."

Brendan glanced around. "I'll be back in a minute."

"Where're you going?"

"Uh, the bathroom." He headed further into the woods, making sure he was out of her view.

Deanna stood in place, watching him walk away. It was getting dark out, and she felt her stomach grumble. She hadn't eaten anything since the plane landed.

Two minutes she waited for him to come back. Six minutes. Getting darker. She walked 30 strides into the direction he went, and even turned on her flashlight.

"Brendan? Where are you?"

She heard noises. Chants. Drumbeats. Her heart quickened. "Brendan, is that you?"

Another moment passed. "*Brendan!*"

"*Run!*"

...

She flung up from her sleeping bag, belting out a scream that startled everyone, including Meg.

"Deanna, are you okay?"

"Deanna, we're here."

She had no idea who was speaking, but the voices made her feel a bit safer.

She curled back up, unable to shut her eyes, knowing that

only her dreams could hurt her now.

...

Johnny and Rusty marched through the forest, flashlights leading the way. The clouds covered the moon, except in short instances when it peeped out like a frightened child uncovering his eyes while watching a horror movie. Someone screamed from the campground.

"Shouldn't we go check that out?" Rusty asked, pushing branches away from his face.

"It's probably just a scared camper," Johnny said. "If we hear anymore, then we know there's a problem."

Johnny craved a cigarette but thought better of it. He didn't have another breath to spare, that night or ever again. If he could survive Vietnam, and even this mess, he knew that lung cancer would eventually get him - he already had 35 years of it built up in his chest cavity. He once went a week without smoking, and threw the worst temper-tantrum in his life when his daughter lost her retainer. He hit the wall, scaring her so badly that she didn't speak to him until he apologized. But that wasn't a good enough reason to continue, and he knew he'd have to work hard to keep calm.

Not wanting to leave litter for the enemy to find and follow, Johnny reached into his pocket for the half-pack of Marlboros and crushed them in his fist, promising himself never to light up again.

Rusty cleared his throat, mostly because he wanted to let Johnny know he was still with him. He pictured himself being snatched away from silent savages hiding behind a tree, and Johnny walking along without even realizing. His heart raced and he regretted coming. Not just with Johnny, but signing up for the camp. *What the hell am I doing here?* he thought.

He could have been back in California, hanging out with his friends, partying, getting high and getting laid. That would have beaten the hell out of marching off to his potential death all because he *had* to go to summer camp for the first time in his life.

In the fall, he had a job lined up at a crisis center for troubled teens. It would also pay him to take social work classes. None of that would have happened without Johnny's recommendation. He knew he had to be there at the camp, in the woods that night, risking his life. He owed it to Johnny.

"Steve's gonna kill them. He'll do it. He's that type."

Johnny had known several people who bragged about killing. He wasn't sure how to respond to them at the time, but he figured it out over the years, wishing he could go back and tell them. They never got the chance to figure it out for themselves - they were all killed soon after.

Tears lined his eyelids, but not a single one dripped down his face. After all of the people he had seen die in his life, he didn't want this to break him apart.

"The only way Steve's trip will be any use is if the women were planning on killing us," Johnny said. "But I have the feeling if that was their intention they would have ambushed us already."

"So what if he's just trying to find the others?"

"That's fine, but I just want to keep him from using that gun."

A few branches popped out and brushed against Johnny's unshaven face. They saw a rope of smoke slithering over the trees in the distance.

"This way," he said.

10

Ithariche sat by the mystical screens, watching the pale men

get situated outside the dwelling. He could hear a booming voice in the distance. Madarain was sprawled over Crediche, a puddle of blood soaking into the fuzzy ground beneath them. Suddenly, warriors dressed in black, holding objects that looked like shortened metal spears, ran up the hill to the dwelling.

The leader of the Tormentcaches ran down the stairs, screaming, *'Prepare for war!'*

The Tores jumped from their resting spots, shaking off drowsiness, grabbing for the spears by their sides. Toriche was already awake, lighting the fire with the box of sticks. They poked the tip of their spears in the blaze, lighting aflame the grass-coated edges.

11

Torana was having second thoughts about dragging the body all the way to the salty water, but she couldn't think of a better alternative. She felt as if Veema's spirit had sprung from the bloodied corpse and was charging after her with a newly carved spear. The healer's hands clamped the dead woman's wrists and she struggled to pull the resistant weight. Sweat and tears fell from her face and her heart was beating so fast that it seemed to be on the verge of exploding. She had always suspected

that the heart could only pump so many times and so fast before eventually failing, and many people died as a result. That was certainly better than being staked, or facing the prophecy.

Suddenly her right foot landed on something and she stumbled to the ground. Her knee hit a stone, jolting pain up her leg. Torana curled up and clutched it, biting her lip to muffle a scream. Nearby, boars began squealing and rustled the bushes as they scurried away.

The moonlight broke free of the clouds long enough to give her a glimpse of not one but two corpses by her side, and a swarm of bugs. She had dropped Shanta on top of a larger bloodied body.

It was a decaying body, a spike protruding from his mouth.

Credarain.

She smelled a deathly odor as she realized she had crashed into the final resting place of the overthrown. Their bodies had been placed there, creating an awful stench and drawing swarms of bugs and scavengers. She could no longer hold back a scream.

Torana struggled to stand and nearly collapsed again as she got to her feet. The rock had cut into her knee, and she could feel blood trickling down her shin. She cringed and bit her lip again, never before feeling the pain of such a wound.

A round leaf and a bowl of water - that's what she needed. The closest place to get a fresh round leaf - aside from the village - was the hideaway near the edge of the forest. If she could make it there, she'd call for Valsa, assuming she hadn't left.

She turned in that direction but nearly crumpled to the ground again before grabbing onto a tree. There was no way her legs would take her that far. The village was much closer.

Then, she thought of what to tell the guards back at the village. Shanta attempted to murder Torana in the forest, but only managed to wound her leg before getting killed. Then Veema's body would be discovered - if it hadn't already - and Shanta, too, would be blamed.

The healer took a deep breath and started back to the village, leaving Shanta to rot into the terrain with her permanent mate.

12

Glass shattered as pale men dressed in black busted through the main level windows in the house, right through the curtains.

'Tormentcache!' Ithariche screamed.

'Tormentcache!' The Tores replied as they fought Hraptor's

army with their flaming spears.

Banca rested on his stomach, facing down the path toward the first level. He put the amulet's silver chain around his neck, hoping the power would protect him from the pale man and they would bow down to him as their new king. If they didn't, he had the wooden end of his weapon resting on his shoulder and his finger on the metal lever. Booming sounds and screams rang through the other chambers.

A pale man in black ran by and Banca squeezed. The weapon discharged, popping louder than thunder, leaving a prolonged ring in his eardrum. The man slumped to the ground.

Banca grabbed another stub from his satchel and pulled open the latch. The gold part of the stub flipped out without the silver. He stuck the other in and closed it, holding the weapon tighter than before. He fired again as another pale man came running through. Again the weapon discharged, popping in his ear. Banca cursed as the pale man fled into the next chamber. He could see a little hole in the wall.

Hearing an incredibly fast chattering sound and horrifying screams, Banca ran to the screen room and closed the gate.

There he saw Madarain spread across the floor with Crediche,

blood puddles soaking into the fuzzy ground around them.

...

The clear gate shattered and a man in black came charging through. Toriche pounced, tackling him as the two landed on the broken shards. In the struggle, Toriche got hold of the man's black-helmeted head, twisting it, hearing a dulled snap.

Immediately afterward, Toriche felt a pain in his shoulder.

He stood and continued outside, where more men in black held weapons as they stood around the square pond.

He held tight, then it hit him in his other shoulder.

Die fighting, he thought, charging, as loud pops and sharp pains broke out over his torso.

He tumbled into the pond. For a split second, he could taste the water.

...

Thunderous *pops* reverberated around the dwelling. Bodies scattered throughout the main chamber, arms and legs twisted around and on top of each other. Their flaming spears fell to the blood-soaked ground and fire traced around them, singing their hair. Crediche's square images blackened to ash. The pale men then retreated as the blazes spread.

As if guided by a force in the darkness, Steve knew exactly which direction to go. It had taken him and Johnny about an hour to make it to the village that morning, but he had been running no more than 20 minutes before sensing he was close.

Suddenly, he heard a woman holler. With the dim moonlight through the clouds, he saw a silhouette charging at him.

He pointed his gun and squeezed the trigger.

The shot's flash gave him enough light to see it was a woman holding a spear that looked like a pool cue. The bullet hit her chest and knocked her backward.

Steve stepped over her and proceeded into the village.

"Fucking bitches!"

Johnny and Rusty heard the shot of the gun echo over the island.

David and Valsa had arms wrapped around each other's bodies when they heard the tremendous popping sounds.

'The destroyer is here!' Valsa screamed as she jumped up and started toward the exit.

David followed.

16

"We lost two!" the SWAT captain yelled over the sound of fire engine sirens as he approached McCoy at the bottom of the driveway.

"Jesus Christ! Is everyone out of the house?"

"The fire started spreading - we had to get out."

"They still might be in there!" McCoy yelled over the sounds of a fire engine.

17

The door crashed open.

Ellen rested in the rocking chair, holding her crying child in a blanket. She looked up and attempted to scream, but only a dry wail came out. Through a smoke-filled hallway, a monster with animal skins draped over his head approached her.

The gunfire meant that someone came to rescue her, but not this man.

Before her eyes clamped shut, she saw Bill's mezuzah hanging around the monster's neck.

A screech followed, and she turned her head away, curling up in the chair.

278

Thump.

Oh my god, what the hell happened? Should I even look?

She had too. The smoke hit her face and she hacked several times. Jeremy continued screeching.

It's the police or fire department, who else would it be?

The gunfire stopped. Reluctantly, she opened her eyes, praying to be swept off her feet with her child and brought to safety with her husband.

The monster was sprawled across the ground below a cloud of smoke, and there was another set of bare feet behind it, a silk robe hanging around the shins, standing tall and strong.

18

Along with hearing the horrible blasts, Torana could see the brightening glow of fire over the village as smoke rushed to the sky.

She was too late. The destroyer had gotten into someone else.

19

The only light in the village came from a small fire, flickering an orange glow against a couple of hunched figures who sat with their backs against poles. Nearby, two guards stood

together as the intruder stepped through the wooded corridor.

The moonlight broke away from the clouds and he could see two spears flying toward him. One narrowly missed his head before skidding across the ground, while the other landed near his feet, sending up dust. Then, one of the women charged, thrusting forth another spear.

The firelight gleamed off of an object he raised and pointed, then it sparked with a horrific blast. The woman staggered backward. She dropped the spear and her knees buckled as she crumbled to the ground. The other froze, staring as the intruder shifted his weapon at her and discharged it again.

"Who's there? Johnny, is that you?" Shawn was facing the opposite direction. "I think Billy's dead!"

"It's me, Steve," he said, seeing the cloth doors shift as natives poked their heads out.

"There's a bunch of women here and they all got spears!"

Steve could sense the eyes watching him as he ran for the poles, unsheathed his knife and cut the bindings from Shawn's wrists.

"Here, untie Billy," he said, handing him the blade.

As the blood rushed back to his shaking hands, Shawn saw

that Billy wasn't dead, just sitting drunkenly against the pole.

"You all right, man?" he asked, slicing the twine.

With his jaw hanging freely and eyes wide open, Billy nodded but didn't say anything. Shawn saw a puddle in the dirt beneath him.

Steve dug out the remaining bullets from the bottom of his waist-pack and rested them in his palm. Fifteen. He had already used three, so he filled in the empty chambers and shoved the others into the front pocket of his shorts.

In the firelight, he saw a rack of spears propped against the edge of a hut, tips lined and pointing like a picket fence. There were two more racks on the other end, with about ten spears per rack. In one corner he saw a pile lying on the ground, unshaven on the ends.

I knew it.

Holding his gun, Steve rushed to the nearest rack, grabbed an armful of spears and carried them to the fire. Patches of dry grass were wrapped beneath the tips.

He leaned the spears over the fire, setting them ablaze and brightening the village, giving him a clearer view of the enemy's faces poking out of the huts.

Holding a spear like a burning javelin, he launched it toward the roof of the nearest shelter. It flew through the air, creating a flaming trail before it hit the grassy covering. Smoke came billowing up as the reddish-orange light brightened. Multiple high-pitched screams came from within.

Steve ran back to the fire and grabbed more spears. Soon, three more roofs ignited into bonfires as smoke formed a giant cloud in the village.

More screams.

The sky above one of the burning huts suddenly darkened as the roof collapsed, dropping the flames inside. Someone came stumbling out, grass skirt ablaze, screaming as she dropped and rolled along the ground.

Steve rushed to another rack, rested every spear across his arms, and brought them back to the fire in the middle of the village. There were three more racks that he could see, and he had every intention of shooting anyone who made a rush for them.

Another roof collapsed as more women and children crawled out of the huts.

Steve raised his gun, watching them flee like rats out of burning holes. He aimed only at the adults, pulled the trigger,

hit the target, cocked it, shifted, and fired again. With each shot, another body hit the ground, not a single bullet wasted.

As more women and children ran from their burning homes, Steve reloaded six more bullets. He walked back to the fire, grabbed a few more flaming spears and flung them at more roofs. He felt a crick in his shoulder with each throw, the same annoying pain he developed during his senior year of high school baseball.

The women emptied the dwellings, pushing each other out of the way as they scurried about. Steve grabbed another spear and threw it straight at a crowd of fleeing women, hitting one in the back, knocking her face-first to the ground. It stuck from her like a burning flagpole.

He had three spears left, their tips burning over the fire. No one had even made a move to the other racks of spears, and he wondered why. Perhaps those women weren't as militant as he had thought, or he had already killed the ones who were.

Billy and Shawn were huddled together by the poles, watching silently as Steve fired another shot into the crowd of topless women. Shawn crawled over to a log and grabbed the large round leaves.

Steve felt a gush of air rush past his head. He dropped the spears and turned to see a woman standing by one of the racks he hadn't raided, the one furthest from the main entrance. She was hunched over, standing on one leg while the other hung lamely. He didn't want to waste a bullet on someone who was already injured, but she pulled her arm back and launched another spear. He easily stepped aside as it slid across the ground. Then she grabbed for another.

Ah, what the fuck? he thought, aiming the gun and squeezing the trigger. He hit her right between her bare breasts. She stumbled into the rack, knocking the spears over as she fell.

Several more women were running from their huts, some of whom were carrying children.

"*Veema!*" someone screamed.

A hard object hit him in the back. He turned to see three children tossing stones at him before retreating back to huts that weren't yet burning. He bent over, picked up a few of the spears he had dropped, poked the grass-covered ends into the fire, and continued tossing them at the grassy roofs.

The gunfire had stopped but the alarms blared and the smoke

thickened.

Jeremy was no longer crying. She buried her head into him, praying to God he was still alive, having no easy way of checking at that moment.

Ellen looked up again, seeing the savage, a human beast, threateningly approach her, his face twisted and horrifying. Draped over him was Bill's blue silk robe. She opened her mouth, trying to let out a scream, but the smoke entered and she choked, then slouched further into her rocking chair with her baby.

21

Johnny and Rusty froze as three tribal women ran past them. Then more came, dashing in every direction, screaming. One of them held a child. The gunshots had stopped.

Firelight beamed through the bushy barriers, outlining the entryway to the village. Just as Rusty hurried to it, another woman came diving through, falling to her hands and knees before getting up and sprinting into the darkness.

Rusty stepped through the entrance. "Steve!"

One last gunshot.

Then Rusty was lying on his back in the corridor.

22

Ithariche cradled the mother and child together in his arms, covering them with the blue robe that he had taken off.

He stepped over the bodies in the entrance room and around the spreading flames. The pale men in black were gone. Suddenly, high-pressured water came crashing through the clear panes.

The former leader of the Tormentcaches held his breath and walked to the exit.

23

Billy and Shawn, both naked and covered with dirty scrapes, saw Johnny hunching over Rusty.

"Steve!" Shawn yelled as he took Billy by the hand and pulled him along. The counselor didn't hear as he ran to the other side of the village to grab spears from the rack that the limping woman had knocked over.

...

Johnny kneeled by Bruce's side, making a conscious effort to look only at his face because his legs had been blown off. His old friend was breathing slowly and his eyes were barely open, just like they had been the first time.

'I don't want my momma seeing me like this.' His words came out slow and murmured, but Johnny understood.

'I'm gonna kill them this time, man!'

Johnny had lost his gun somewhere in the forest. All he had left was his knife, which he unsheathed and clenched, ready to slice the throat of every gook he possibly could until they gunned him down.

...

Steve picked up the spears as if he were gathering firewood, pulling some from underneath the limping woman he had shot. The firelight gleamed off of her smooth skin. She was lying on her back, a spot of blood between her breasts. There was a gash on her knee, blood dripping down her shin to her foot. She was still breathing, and staring at him.

'Hraptor,' she muttered.

With an armful of spears, Steve turned and headed back to the fire. Then, on the other side of the village, he saw Johnny - a knife in his hand - on his knees beside Rusty. Fire reflected off of the blade. *"Oh shit."*

...

I'm gonna kill them all this time, Bruce, I'm gonna at least try, man.

Johnny jumped to his feet, clutching his weapon, seeing the

gooks fleeing from their hideouts. One woman came running in his direction, clutching an infant to her chest.

"Johnny!"

The woman ran to him and stopped, tears streaming from her eyes as she looked into his.

"Johnny!"

The woman stood inches from him, babbling foreign words.

With its tiny mouth muffled by his mother's breast, the child let out a screech. He had a patch of dark hair atop his head, thicker than he had ever seen on such a young child.

"Johnny!"

A *refugee*, he thought. Johnny shuddered and pointed his knife away from her. People continued fleeing as their village burned like hell, again. The only thing different was the two nude American boys in the middle of it all, one pulling the other along by the hand.

The child wailed as the panicking mother continued pleading with him.

Wait a minute...

"Johnny please help!"

Johnny gave the woman a hard, serious stare as he pointed to

the woods. She understood, and ran.

"Shawn, Billy, come here! Help me with Rusty," he said.

...

Three women stood about ten feet apart, closing in on Steve as he stood by the fire, hurrying to put the remaining bullets into his gun. Other than running in the opposite direction, he didn't know what to do if they all charged him at once. With his back to them, even if he fired his gun over his shoulder, it would only take one spear to knock him down, possibly kill him.

But the women looked nervous and unsure of what to do even as they closed in on him. He raised the revolver and pulled the trigger, shooting the middle one in the chest, sending up a cloud of dust as she hit the ground. Only flinching, the other two continued closing in.

"Steve, you cut it out now, dammit, and come back to the campsite!" Johnny yelled from the main entrance, slicing off Rusty's shirt with his knife.

"Here, wipe these on it," Shawn said, handing him the large round leaves.

Another woman had grabbed a spear and joined the others, forming a semicircle around the pale man.

With the fires providing light, Steve saw in the background a young woman step through the western entrance. Someone followed her in.

David.

Holding her spear like a baseball bat, one of the women in the semicircle charged him. "*Tormentcache!*"

Steve shot her, shifted to another woman who took a strong step forward and blasted her, too. He spun around and shot the final woman, who had taken several steps backward.

Meanwhile, the girl who arrived with David had picked up a spear and ran toward Steve, unfazed by the destroyer's weapon and the dead warriors surrounding him.

"Valsa!"

Without a second thought, Steve raised his gun and pulled the trigger. Her head jerked back before her torso hit the ground.

"David, come here!" Steve hollered.

Steve looked around for other natives, but they were dead, dying or gone.

"Steve, get your ass over here now and help us with Rusty!" Johnny hollered.

With tears in his eyes and a lump in his throat, David walked slowly over to the counselor.

"Steve," he said hoarsely. He glanced at Valsa's body. She had been hit in the face - not a chance she survived the shot.

"Come on, man, come back to the campsite with me. I saved Shawn and Billy and we're heading back now." Still holding his gun, Steve picked up a spear from the hands of a dead woman. The camper kept walking toward him, then stopped.

David let out an awful wail that sounded like a tortured cat. Tears, saliva and mucus covered his reddened face.

"It's okay, man, we're heading back now." Steve put his arm around David's shoulder and patting it profusely. "We're gonna go home soon."

The fires lit up the village like daylight, expanding the hovering cloud above.

"Steve!"

"I'm coming, Johnny," Steve said, holding both weapons in one hand and David's shoulder with the other.

The camper let out another high-pitched cry.

"I forgive you for running away, man. You're not in any trouble. We're going back to camp and then going home."

...

"Shit, Johnny, my fucking shoulder is killing me," Rusty said. "What's up with these leaves? They're burning!"

"That's all we got, Rust. That's all we got." Johnny knelt by Rusty's side, applying pressure on his shoulder with the leaf. Somehow, he had forgotten to bring his first-aid kit, not to mention his waist-pack. He never went anywhere without that thing - even back home.

Shawn and Billy sat with them, their hands covering their crotches. They looked up to see Steve walking toward the exit with a spear in his hand, his arm around David like a father taking his son on a fishing trip. Behind them, the roofs collapsed on a few more huts, darkening the fiery glow for a moment while sending up bursts of smoke.

And that was when Johnny realized that Steve had done everything that he intended. He saved Billy, Shawn and David. He killed the tribal warriors, women whose intentions were anything but predictable. The ones who escaped wouldn't come near the camp - they'd hide in the forest, expecting to be stalked and killed, too.

Then Steve screamed.

Johnny, Billy and Shawn looked up to see David standing over the counselor's back, raising a knife and plunging it furiously.

"David!"

The camper took one last jab, leaving the blade in the back of Steve's neck. Then he grabbed the gun from the counselor's twitching hand.

Johnny, Billy and Shawn looked away as they heard one final blast.

24

Smoke billowing behind him, the last of the Tormentcaches cradled the woman and child as he stepped through the hut's main entrance. The first thing he noticed was the size of the crowd that waited outside, with weapons. Even if the Tores defeated those who entered the dwelling, there were far more to deal with than they could ever handle. In the corner of his eye he saw men holding onto large snakes that extended from the sides of monstrous red carts. These snakes sprayed violent storms from their mouths, directed at the fire.

One man's voice projected above them all, so loud, it could have been Hraptor speaking.

"Put the hostages down and put your hands on your head!"

With the smoke out of his eyes, Ithariche looked at the child's unmoving face. He wasn't breathing, nor was his mother. Midway down the hill, Ithariche carefully laid the woman and child on the ground, then sat on his knees. He picked up the child and grabbed the back of his neck. He sealed his lips around the tiny mouth and gave him a puff of air, a trick Torana once taught him to revive those who sank beneath water for too long. Seconds later, the infant coughed several times and then began crying.

Cradling the child in one arm, Ithariche bent over and blew into the mother's mouth, sending a gust of air through her lungs. She began coughing before her breathing returned.

The pale man's voice boomed again as the Tore tucked the infant into the unconscious woman's arms.

Ithariche looked at the beautiful child. A tear dropped from his eye, splashing on the infant's young, pink flesh, merging with the tears that flowed from his own eyes.

The booming voice disappeared, replaced by one that screamed directly behind him, "Put your hands on your head or I'll shoot!"

Ithariche was kneeling, facing the woman and child, savoring the sight of these innocent people as the pale men closed in

behind him.

Slowly, his head tilted toward the sky.

25

As the nearest star rose...

"Dispatch, we found em!" A band of teenagers and counselors stood waving as the four helicopters approached from the fog.

Epilogue

1

Los Angeles Times

'Tribal' island report due today

Investigators are set to disclose what they found during their six-month investigation into the so-called 'tribal' island deaths, which took the lives of two campers and a counselor from local real estate mogul Jack Rachel's 'Camp Survival' last summer. Officials have confirmed the linkage between the island and the infamous Tanglewood hostage situation, where 25 tribesmen were killed - mostly by SWAT gunfire - after they murdered house owner Bill Steinberg and neighbor Bob Jacoby. Doctors say that Adventure Flights pilot George Kraser, who transported the tribesmen to Tanglewood from the island, died of a heart attack

after he landed the plane on the suburban road.

While sources say there is still some mystery as to what happened in Tanglewood, there are conflicting reports as to what happened on the island.

Former camp counselor Johnny Stewart, one of four witnesses, insists there were scores of tribal women and children still alive at the time rescue choppers arrived, though many had been shot dead by counselor Steve Simmons. Stewart and the other witnesses say Simmons was stabbed to death by a camper who then took his own life. However, officials have already disclosed that they found no one alive on the island, but more than 50 bodies - including children - that suggests a far bigger massacre than what Stewart describes.

Stewart recently came to a settlement with William Johnson, whose son was brutally murdered by the tribesmen on the island. Johnson sued Stewart for burying his son's body without consent. Terms of the agreement were not discussed. ...

...

World War II Japanese fighter jet found

American investigators claim to have found a Reisen A6M Zero-Sen Japanese fighter jet in the ocean beside an island only

900 miles off the coast of Los Angeles. Japan used those jets to attack Pearl Harbor in 1941, but weren't believed to have traveled past Hawaii until now...

...

Real estate mogul Rachel found dead

Los Angeles-based real estate heavy Jack Rachel was found dead in his Bel-Air home Tuesday of a self-inflicted gunshot wound, authorities say. Rachel was due in court today to testify against prosecutors who allege that he fixed three bank auctions on foreclosed homes in southern L.A. last year...

2

In the Holy Cross Hospital of San Diego, in the eastern wing of the third floor, a man in his mid-forties, wearing a suit with a tie, waited patiently for a family of 12 - mostly kids - to step away from the glass partition. As a masked female nurse exited the sterilized room, cradling a crying newborn with latex gloved hands, the family rushed over, leaving him all the space he needed.

The man sighed, stepped up, and forced his eyes to scan the room. There were 16 incubators within, lined four to a row, half of them occupied. Delicate hisses came from the left. He looked,

but that wasn't the one. Four other children were sleeping nearby, all of whom had thin hair and pinkish skin.

There was one child left, in the far corner, seemingly placed there as if someone wanted him separated from the others.

This child's hands floated randomly in the air, reaching, exploring. His skin had an amber tinge to it, his head a mop of black hair. Not a tear came to his eye, nor was there a whimper in his throat, as the nurse lifted him up and walked him out the door.

June 24, 1993 - Aug. 20, 2002